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AND

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POPULAR FRENCH NOVELS.

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AND

RISLER THE ELDER.

BY ALPHONSE DAUDET.

(Translated from the Fiftieth French Edition.)

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FROMONT THE YOUNGER AND RISLER THE ELDER.

BOOK I.

CHAPTER I.

A WEDDING PARTY AT VÉFOUR'S.

"MADAME Chèbe!"

"My son."

"I am so happy."

This was about the twentieth time that day the good Risler had said he was happy, and always with the same calm and tender look, and in the same slow, deep hollow voice; the kind of voice that quivers with emotion and dares not raise itself too high lest it should break suddenly into tears.

For nothing in the world, would Risler have wept at that moment—imagine a husband so affected at his wedding banquet! And yet he felt strongly inclined to do so. His happiness suffocated him, it held him by the throat and would not allow his words utterance, all he could do was to murmur again and again with trembling lips, "I am happy—I am happy."

And truly he had cause to be so.

Since the morning the poor man had been in one of those magnificent dreams, from which one fears to awake suddenly with dazzled eyes. But to him his dream appeared to have no ending.

It had commenced at five o'clock that morning, and at ten o'clock at night, ten o'clock precisely by Véfour's timepiece, it was still continuing.

Early in the morning he was pacing his old bachelor chamber with a joy mingled with impatience, his beard already trimmed, his coat brushed, two pairs of white gloves in his pocket. Then came the gala carriages, and in the first, the one with the white horses, white reins, and a lining of delicate primrose coloured damask, the veil of the bride appears like a cloud. They enter the church, two and two, always that little white cloud ahead—light, dazzling. Then the organ, the beadle, the sermon from the *curé*, the wax tapers, the jewelled altars, the spring toilettes, and the crowd in the vestry. The little white veil lost, drowned, surrounded, embraced, while the husband exchanges hearty shakes of the hand with all the great Parisian tradesmen come to do him honour. And the grand final burst from the organ, more impressive because the door of the church being wide open, the entire street participates in the family ceremony—the sounds passing the door at the same time as the *cortège*, the exclamations of the neighbourhood, a polisher in her great leather apron crying out: “The bridegroom is not handsome, but the bride is monstrously pretty.”—That is the kind of thing that makes you proud when you are a bridegroom.

Then followed the breakfast at the factory in one of the work-shops, decked with hangings and flowers, and next the walk in the Bois de Boulogne, a concession made to the mother-in-law, Madame Chêbe, who with her narrow middle-class notions would not have believed her daughter married, without the tour of the lake, and the visit to the cascade. Then there was the return to dinner, while the lamps were being lighted on the boulevard, where the people turned to see the wedding pass, a truly substantial wedding party borne by its hired horses right up to the foot of Véfour's staircase.

And Risler had arrived at this point of his dream.

At this hour, overcome with fatigue and happiness the good Risler looked vaguely round the large horse-shoe shaped table laid for twenty-five persons, in whose smiling and well-known faces he seemed to see his own happiness reflected. Dinner was at last drawing to a close. Profiles were turned towards each other, black coat sleeves were caught sight of behind baskets of asclepias, a child's laughing glance appeared above a vase of fruit, and the dessert on a level with the faces imparted to all the table-cloth gaiety, colour and light.

Ah! yes, Risler was happy.

Excepting his brother Frank, all those he loves are here. First of all, facing him is Sidonie, yesterday the little Sidonie, to-day his wife. She had thrown aside her veil, had come out of her cloud. Above her dress of pure white silk, there rose a lovely face more fair and soft, with a crown of luxuriant hair beneath that other tastefully arranged crown.

After Sidonie and Frank, Risler's dearest friend in the world was Madame George Fromont—she whom he called Madame "Chorche"—the wife of his partner, the daughter of the late Fromont, his old master and his idol. He had placed her near him, and the manner of his speech to her showed his affection and deference. She was quite a young woman, nearly the same age as Sidonie, but of a beauty more perfect, more tranquil. She spoke little, feeling bewildered in such a throng; but she strove to appear amiable.

On the other side of Risler was Madame Chèbe, the mother of his bride, beaming, glittering in a dress of shot-green silk, stiff and shining as a buckler. Since the morning, all the thoughts of this good woman were as brilliant as the emblematic colour of her robe. Every instant she said to herself, "My daughter has married Fromont and Risler of the Rue des Vieilles Haudriettes," for in her thoughts it was not Risler alone that her daughter had espoused, but the whole firm, that firm so famous in the commercial world of Paris, and each time she considered this glorious event, Madame Chèbe drew herself up, until the silk of her buckler cracked again.

What a contrast was Monsieur Chèbe, placed a few chairs farther down. In some households the same causes produce totally different effects.

This little man with the large utopian forehead, polished, bossy, and empty as a glass globe, wore an air as furious as that of his wife was radiant. And it never changed, for M. Chèbe was angry the whole year round. This evening, however, he had not his usual pitiful, faded expression, nor did he wear his large, loose overcoat, the pockets of which he stuffed with samples of oil, wine, truffles, or vinegar, according to his dealings in one or other of these articles. His black coat, magnificent and new, was a fitting pendant to the green silk dress; but unhappily, his thoughts were of the colour of his coat.

"Why had he not been put next to the bride, as was his right? Why had they given that place to young Fromont?"

And that old Gardinois, Fromont's grandfather, what was he doing so near Sidonie? Ah! that's how it is! All for the Fromonts, and nothing for the Chèbes. And these men are surprised we make revolutions."

Happily for the throwing off his bile, the angry little man sat next his friend Delobelle, an old actor without an engagement, who listened with the placid and majestic manner of his great days. One may, indeed, have been kept off the stage for fifteen years by the malice of managers, but one can still recall, when necessary, the stage attitudes appropriate to all occasions. So this evening, Delobelle had his wedding-day make-up, an expression half-serious, half-smiling, condescending to inferiors, easy and solemn at the same time. One might have supposed he was assisting, before a large audience, at a feast of pasto-board viands in a first act, and this fantastic individual had still more the air of acting a part, from the fact that, expecting to be called upon during the evening, he had, ever since sitting down to table, been passing over in his mind some of the finest pieces in his repertory, the repeating of which gave to his face a vague, factitious, and abstracted expression, the falsely attentive air of a comedian on the stage feigning to listen to what is said to him, but thinking only of his "cue" all the time.

Singularly enough the bride also had somewhat of this expression, as if she too were acting a part. On her young and pretty face, beaming with happiness, a secret pre-occupation was visible, and each moment a slight smile played at the corners of her lips as if she were in communion with herself. It was with this little smile that she replied to the lively compliments of the old grandfather Gardinois on her right hand.

"And this is Sidonie," cried he laughing, "the same Sidonie who two months ago talked of going into a convent. One understands girls' convents, it is, as they say in my part of the country, 'The Convent of St. Joseph, two pairs of shoes under one bed!'"

And all the company laughed at the rustic jokes of this old peasant from Berry, whose colossal fortune compensated for his lack of knowledge, and of good-nature, but not of wit. For the rogue had more of that than all these tradespeople together. Among the few people that inspired any sympathy in him the little Chèbe, whom he had known from a child, pleased him particularly, while she on her part, too recently rich not to

venerate a fortune, chatted with him with a combined air of respect and coquetry. To her left-hand neighbour, to George Fromont, her husband's partner, her manner was full of reserve. Their conversation was limited to the courtesies of the table, and between them there was even an affectation of indifference.

Suddenly the rustle that announces a general rising from table was heard, a sound of silks, the moving of chairs, the concluding words of the conversation, the last peal of laughter. And in the half-silence Madame Chèbe becoming communicative, said aloud to a cousin from the provinces, in ecstasies before the calm and reserved manner of the bride, who at that moment was leaning on the arm of M. Gardinois, "Look, cousin, at that child, nobody ever knows what she is thinking about."

Then every one rose and passed into the large ball-room. While those invited to the ball were arriving in crowds and mingling with the guests that had dined, and the band was busy tuning its instruments, the gentlemen were strutting before the white toilettes of impatient young ladies. The bridegroom, shy among so many persons, had taken refuge, with his friend Planus—Sigismond Planus—cashier for the last thirty years in the house of Fromont, in the little gallery filled with flowers and hung with a paper ornamented with clusters of climbing foliage which make it, as it were, a bank of verdure among the gilded saloons of Véfour; there they were at last alone and could talk to one another.

"Sigismond, old fellow! I am so happy."

And Sigismond was happy also, but Risler would not give him time to say so. Now that he had no fear of weeping before all the world, all the joy of his heart overflowed.

"Only think, my friend, isn't it extraordinary that a pretty girl like her should have wanted me, for in fact I am not handsome, though I had no need of that hussy to tell me so this morning, besides I am forty-two. She is so *mignonne*, too. There are plenty of others she might have chosen, younger, more stylish, not to speak of my poor Frank, who loved her so dearly. Ah well! no, it was her old Risler she would have, and it came about so oddly. For a long time I had noticed she was sad, quite changed. I fancied she had some love troubles, her mother and I racked our brains to find out what ailed her. One morning, Madame Chèbe came into my rooms in tears, saying, "It is *you* she loves, my poor friend!" And it

was me, it was *me*. . Heavens ! who would have ever thought of such a thing ? Only fancy that in the same year I have had two such strokes of good fortune. To be made partner in the house of Fromont and to marry Sidonie !”

At this moment, to the measure of a waltz, languid and slow, a couple of waltzers kept time in the smaller saloon. They were the bride and the partner of Risler, George Fromont, both of them young, both equally elegant looking. They conversed in a low tone of voice, concealing their words as it were in the narrow turns of the waltz.

“You lie !” said Sidonie, pale but still with her slight smile ; and the other, far paler than she, replied, “I do not lie. It was my uncle insisted on my marriage ; he was dying—you were gone—I did not dare to say no.”

Far off Risler was admiring them. “How pretty she is ! how well they dance !” observed he. But perceiving him the dancers parted and Sidonie came to him quickly, saying, “What ! You there ! what are you doing ? They have been looking for you everywhere. Why are you not below ?”

All the time she spoke, she arranged the knot of his cravat with the pretty movements of an impatient woman. This enchanted Risler, who smiled at Sigismond out of the corner of his eye, too pleased at feeling the touch of the little loved hand on his neck, to perceive that it trembled to the very finger-tips.

“Take my arm,” said she to him, and they returned together to the ballroom. Her long white train made his ill-cut, ill-fitting black coat appear still more awkward ; but a coat could not be re-made off-hand, like the knot of a cravat ; it had to be taken as it was. While they saluted in passing all the company anxious for their smile, Sidonie had one moment of pride, of gratified vanity. Unhappily it was not to last, however. In a corner of the room there was a young and beautiful woman, whom no one asked to dance, who looked on the dancers with calm eyes, brightened with all the joy of first motherhood. The moment he perceived her Risler went straight up to her and obliged Sidonie to take a seat by her side. . It is unnecessary to say that this was Madame George. To whom else would he have spoken with such respectful tenderness ? into what other hand but hers, would he have placed the hand of his little Sidonie, saying : “You will love her well. You are so good, she has so much need of your advice and of your knowledge of the world ?”

"But, my good Risler," replied Madame George, "Sidonie and I are old friends, and we have every reason to continue so." And her calm glance sought unsuccessfully to meet that of her old friend.

With his perfect ignorance of women, and the habit he had of treating Sidonie as a child, Risler continued in the same style: "Take her for your example, little one, there are not two in the whole world like Madame 'Chorche.' She has all the heart of her poor father—a true Fromont."

Sidonie, with downcast eyes and with a shiver that ran from the tip of her satin *bottines* to the last spray of orange blossoms in her crown, bowed without replying. But the good Risler saw nothing. Emotion, the ball, the music, all these flowers, all these lights. He was drunk, he was mad. This atmosphere of incomparable happiness which surrounded him, turned him giddy, and he believed that all the others breathed it like himself. He did not suspect the rivalries and petty hatreds that underlay all these bedecked brows.

He did not see Delobelle leaning with his elbow on the mantelpiece, tired of his eternal postures, with one hand in his waistcoat and his hat on his hip while the hours slipped by and no one dreamed of profiting by his talents. He did not see M. Chèbe waiting gloomily between the doors and more furious than ever against the Fromonts. "Oh, those Fromonts, what a place they occupy at this wedding! They are all here with their wives and children, their friends and friends' friends. You could imagine it was the marriage of one of them. Who mentions Risler or the Chèbes? They have not even introduced him—the father!" And to add to the indignation of the little man there was his wife, Madame Chèbe, smiling maternally on every one in her robe of scarabeus-like scintillations.

Besides, as at most weddings, there were here two distinct sets that touched each other, but were never blended. One of these soon yielded place to the other. These Fromonts who irritated M. Chèbe so much, and who formed the aristocracy of the ball, the president of the Chamber of Commerce, the syndic of the attorneys, a famous chocolate manufacturer, deputy to the Corps Législatif, and the old millionaire Gardinois; all these retired a little after midnight. George Fromont and his wife also drove home in their brougham, and there remained now only the faction of Risler and Chèbe, and the fête changing its aspect began to get noisy.

The illustrious Delobelle, weary at finding that no one asked anything of him, determined to request something from himself, and in a voice as loud as a gong began the monologue from "Ruy Blas:" "*Bon appetit messieurs!*" while people crowded in front of the chocolate and the glasses of hot punch on the side-board. Some economical little toilettes spread out on the rout seats felt delighted at producing a certain effect at last, and here and there some gawky little shopmen amused themselves by venturing upon a quadrille. For a long time the bride had wished to leave, and at last she retired with Risler and Madame Chèbe. As for M. Chèbe, who had recovered all his importance, it was impossible to get him away. "Some one must do the honours, what the deuce!"—and the little man undertook them, I can tell you. He grew red, brilliant, quarrelsome, turbulent, almost seditious. Below he was heard talking politics with the *maitre d'hotel* of Véfour's, and making the most daring propositions.

Through the deserted streets the carriage of the bride, with the white reins loosely held by the coachman, rolled slowly towards the Marais. Madame Chèbe kept on talking, enumerating all the splendours of this memorable day, going into ecstasies above all over the dinner, whose common-place bill of fare was to her the highest embodiment of luxury. Sidonie dreamed in the corner of the vehicle, and Risler, if he no longer said "I am happy," thought so to himself with all his heart. Once he tried to take a little white hand that rested against the raised window, but it was quickly withdrawn, and he remained without stirring, lost in mute adoration.

They crossed the Halles and the Rue de Rambuteau full of market-carts, then towards the end of the Rue des Francs-Bourgeois they turned the corner of the Archives and entered the Rue de Braque. There they stopped, and Madame Chèbe descended at her own door, a door too narrow for the splendid green silk dress which disappeared in the passage with a rebellious-rumpling; and a murmur of all its flounces.

A few minutes afterwards, a great and massive doorway in the Rue des Vieilles Haudriettes, which had, beneath some half-obliterated ancient armorial bearings, a sign-board with the words "Paper-hanging Manufactory," in blue letters, opened its double doors to admit the wedding-carriage.

This time the bride, who had remained immovable as if asleep, appeared to awake suddenly, and if all the lights had not

been extinguished in the immense building, with its workshops and its show-rooms on either side the court-yard, Risler might have seen a smile of triumph brighten that beautiful but enigmatical face. The wheels rolled softly over the fine gravel of the garden, and the carriage soon stopped before the door-way of a small mansion of two stories. Here the young household of the Fromonts resided, and here Risler and his wife were to install themselves in a suite of rooms above. The house had a grand appearance, and wealth derived from business here did its best to compensate for the dark street, and the old-fashioned quarter. There was a rich carpet on the stairs up to the doors of the apartments of the newly married couple, flowers in their ante-chamber, on every side white marble and the reflections of mirrors and brightly polished brass.

While Risler walked with delight through the handsome suite of rooms, Sidonie remained alone in her chamber. By the light of a little blue lamp suspended from the ceiling, she glanced in the looking-glass that reflected her from head to foot, at all the luxury so new to her, but instead of going to bed, she opened the window and remained motionless leaning over the balcony. The night was clear and cool. She could distinctly see the entire factory with its innumerable shutterless windows, its bright and glittering panes, its tall chimney lost in the deep sky, and nearer the little ornamental garden under the old walls of the ancient mansion. All around were poor and miserable looking roofs, and dark dusky streets. Suddenly she trembled; over there in the gloomiest and ugliest of all those roofs, that jostled each other, propped one against another as if over-weighted with miseries, a window on the fifth story was thrown wide open to the night. She recognised it instantly; it was the window of the flat occupied by her parents, the window of the landing. What things the mere name recalled to her memory! the hours and days she had passed there leaning on the damp sill, gazing in the direction of the factory! Again at this moment she seemed to see there the shabby little Chêbe, and within the frame of that poor casement, all her childhood, all her sad Parisian girl's youth passed before her eyes.

CHAPTER II.

THE HISTORY OF LITTLE SIDONIE--THREE FAMILIES ON ONE FLOOR.

At Paris, among poor households, straitened for space in their too small apartments, the common landing is like an additional room, an enlargement of the lodgings. It is there that in summer a little air comes from without, and that the wives gossip and the children play.

When little Sidonie made too much noise in the sitting-room, her mother used to say, "Give over, you weary me! go and play on the landing," and away the child ran quickly enough. This landing, at the top story of an old house, in which space had not been stinted, formed a vast lofty lobby, protected on the side of the staircase by a wrought-iron balustrade and lighted by a large window from which could be seen roofs, courts, and other windows, while farther off, the garden of Fromont's factory showed as a verdant corner in the interval between some gigantic old walls.

In all this there was nothing particularly gay, but it pleased the child much more than her home did. This home was so sad, especially on days when it rained, and Ferdinand Chèbe did not go out. Ferdinand Chèbe was one of those idle speculating tradesmen so common to Paris, with a brain seething with new ideas that unfortunately never came to anything. His wife, whom at first he had dazzled, soon detected his insignificance, and ended by bearing with equal patience his continual dreams of fortune and the inconveniences that immediately followed.

Of the eighty thousand francs of dowry brought by her and squandered by him in absurd undertakings, nothing remained to them but a little annuity which still had its effect on the neighbours, like the Cashmere shawl of Madame Chèbe, saved from all shipwrecks, with her wedding veil and a couple of small diamond studs, that Sidonie often entreated her mother to show her, at the bottom of the drawer, where they lay in an old case of white velvet, with the name of the jeweller in gold letters,

faded after the lapse of thirty years. This was the sole remnant of splendour left to this poor household.

A long, a very long time ago, M. Chèbe had tried to obtain some employment that might enable him to add to their little annuity. But he looked for it only in what he called "the outdoor trade," as his health, he said, did not permit him to engage in any sedentary occupation. It appears, indeed, that in the early days of his marriage, when he was in a large way of business, and had his own horse and gig, for the service of the house, the little man met with a serious fall from his vehicle. This fall, of which he spoke on all occasions, served as an excuse for his idleness. You were not five minutes in M. Chèbe's company before he observed to you in a confidential tone, "You know the accident that happened to the Duc d'Orléans?" Then tapping his little bald head, he would continue, "The same happened to me in my youth."

After this famous fall, all office-work made him giddy, and he found himself fatally restricted to "the outdoor trade." So he had been from time to time a traveller in wines, books, truffles, clocks, and many other things besides. Unfortunately, he grew weary, he never found his position good enough for a merchant who had kept a gig; so little by little, through considering all occupations beneath him, he had grown old and incapable, and had become a genuine idler with a marked taste for loafing.

We are apt to reproach artists for their vagaries, their caprices, their horror of conventionality, which throws them into the opposite extreme; but what are these compared to the ridiculous fancies, the wild eccentricities, that people of the trading class, with nothing to do, can be capable of.

M. Chèbe made himself certain rules for his promenades. No one knew better than he the famous shops and the specialities they were noted for; and Madame Chèbe, impatient at seeing the stupid head of her husband constantly at the window while she worked so hard at mending the family linen, often got rid of him by sending him out. "You know at the corner of what-d'ye-call-it Street, where they sell such good cakes. We want some of these for dessert." And the husband would sally forth; take the boulevard, gaze in all the shops, wait for an omnibus, pass half his day in purchasing a couple of *brîoches* for six sous, and then return in triumph, wiping his forehead.

M. Chêbe loved the summer, the Sundays, long walks in the dust at Clamart or Romainville, the round of fêtes, with their attendant crowds. He was one of those who at the time of the August fêtes, would go and look at the coloured lamps, the evergreens and the scaffoldings for a whole week beforehand. And his wife never complained of this. She was then, at least, free from the everlasting grumbler lolling all day beside her chair, with his projects of gigantic speculations, his just-missed calculation, his continual harpings on the past, and his rage at not gaining any money. And she, poor woman, gained none herself; but she was so good a manager, that her marvellous economy supplied all their wants so well that misery, the neighbour of poverty, had never been able to enter those three small rooms, always clean, with their furniture carefully polished and the shabbier things hidden under new covers.

Opposite the Chêbes' door, the brass handle of which shone brightly on the landing, were two other smaller doors. On the first, a card fixed by four tin tacks, in accordance with the practice of industrial artists, bore the name of "RISLER, DESIGNER FOR MANUFACTURES," while the other had a small leather tablet inscribed in gold letters, "MESDAMES DELOBELLE: BIRDS AND INSECTS FOR MILLINERS."

The latter door, often open, disclosed to view a large room where two women, a mother and her daughter—the latter almost a child—both pale, both weary, worked at one of those thousand fanciful occupations that go to compose what is called "*l'article de Paris*." It was then the fashion to ornament bonnets and ball-dresses with the pretty insects of South America, splendid as jewels, with reflections like precious stones. This was the *spécialité* of the Delobelles.

A wholesale house which received parcels direct from the Antilles, sent them unopened long light boxes, from which, when the cover was removed, a faint smell, accompanied by a dust of arsenic, proceeded. In these boxes were heaped up flies already impaled, and birds packed closely together with their wings confined by a band of fine paper. The Delobelles had to mount all these—to make the flies tremble on invisible brass wires, to spread the plumage of the humming-birds, to cause them to shine, to repair with silk any injured coral foot, to substitute two glittering beads for eyes, and impart to insect and bird alike the attitude of life and grace. The mother prepared the work under the direction of her daughter; for

Désirée, young as she was, had an exquisite taste, a fairy-like invention; and no one could place the glass eyes in the little birds' heads so well as she, or display their rigid wings so naturally.

A cripple since childhood in consequence of an accident which had not impaired the gracefulness of her fine and regular features, Désirée Delobelle owed to her almost enforced quiet and her confirmed disinclination to go abroad a certain aristocratic delicacy of complexion and the whitest of hands. With her hair always coquettishly dressed, she passed her days in a large arm-chair before a table covered with fashion plates and birds of all colours, finding in the capricious elegance of her occupation forgetfulness of her own trials, and compensation for her monotonous life.

She imagined all the little wings flying away from her motionless table to begin real voyages round the Parisian world, sparkling at fêtes under the chandeliers; and from simply noting the way in which she arranged her birds and her insects, one could have divined the nature of her thoughts. On her days of depression and sadness, the slender beaks were stretched out, the wings spread wide open as if to dart furiously away from fifth-floor lodgings, privation and misery. On other days, when Désirée was contented, the little creatures had a magic air of sprightliness, the headstrong and impudent air of some caprice of fashion.

Happy or unhappy, Désirée always worked with the same ardour. From dawn until far into the night her table was covered with work. When the last gleam of daylight had departed, when the great bell of the factory sounded throughout the neighbourhood, Madame Delobelle lit the lamps, and after a very light repast they resumed work again. These two indefatigable women had one fixed idea which prevented their feeling the weight of all this toil—this was the histrionic glory of the illustrious Delobelle.

Since he had quitted the provincial stage to play at Paris Delobelle had waited for an intelligent manager—the providential and ideal manager that discovers genius,—to seek him out and offer him a part suited to his powers. Perchance he might at first have found some secondary part in some third-rate theatre, but Delobelle would not so lower himself, he preferred to wait, to struggle as he said; and this is the way he struggled.

In the morning in his bedroom, and often in his bed he ran through some of the parts in his old repertory, and the ladies Delobelle shivered as they heard resound behind the partition tirades from "Antony" or the "Medecin des Enfants," declaimed in a rumbling voice that mingled with the thousand street-cries of the great Parsian hive. Then after breakfast the comedian went out until nightfall to "do his boulevard," that is to say, to walk with mincing steps between the Château d'Eau and the Madeleine, a tooth-pick in the corner of his mouth, his hat a little on one side, his hands always gloved, his clothes well-brushed and shining. This question of appearance was of much importance in his eyes. It was one of his greatest chances of success, a bait for the manager, the intelligent manager to whom the idea would never present itself of engaging a man who was thread-bare and ill-dressed.

So the poor Delobelle women were careful that he wanted for nothing. And you may imagine what quantities of birds and insects needed mounting to rig out an old fellow in this trim. But the actor found it all very natural. In his mind the efforts and privations of his wife and child were not for him personally, but for that mysterious unknown genius of which he considered himself as in some sort the depositary.

Between the families of Chèbe and Delobelle there was a certain analogy of position, only with the Delobelles it was less dull. The others as small annuitants felt that their lives were hemmed in, without horizon and invariably the same; while in the actor's family hope and illusion opened superb vistas in all directions. The Chèbes lived as it were in a blind alley, the Delobelles lived in a dingy little street, without light or air, but through which one day a great boulevard would pass. Moreover Madame Chèbe believed no longer in her husband, while, thanks to the virtue of one magic word, "Art" her neighbour never had a doubt of hers.

For years and years had M. Delobelle ineffectually sipped vermouth with dramatic agents, absinthe with the *chefs de clique*, bitters with vanderwillists and dramatists; engagements never came. So that without once having a part the poor man had passed from juvenile lead to heavy lead, then to financiers, to heavy fathers, and finally to old fogies. Still he held on. Once or twice he had been offered the means of gaining his living as manager of a club or a café, or as superintendent in some great shop like the "Phares de la Bastille" or

the "Colosse de Rhodes." For such posts good manners of themselves sufficed, and these Delobelle did not lack—ye Gods! Nevertheless to all such proposals the great man opposed an heroic refusal. "I have not the right to give up the stage," cried he. In the mouth of this poor devil, who had not set his foot on the boards for years this sounded irresistibly comic, but one had no desire to laugh when one saw his wife and daughter working day and night amid the fumes of arsenic and heard them too, repeat energetically, while breaking their needles against the wires of the little birds, "No! No! M. Delobelle has no right to give up the stage."

Happy man, always smiling with an air of condescension, to whom the habit of reigning in dramas had given for life the exceptional position of a spoiled and admired infant king. When he went abroad the shopkeepers in the Rue des Francs Bourgeois, with the predilection of Parisians for all that belongs to the stage, saluted him respectfully. He was always so well-dressed, so good-humoured, so complaisant. When one thinks that every Saturday evening he, Ruy Blas, Antony, Raphaël in the "Filles de Marbre," Andrès in the "Pirates de la Savane," would go, with a milliner's box under his arm containing the work of his women folk, to the establishment for flowers and feathers in the Rue Saint-Denis, Ah! well! even in acquitting himself of such a commission as that, this deuce of a man had so much nobility, such natural dignity, that the young lady charged to verify and discharge the Delobelles' account was quite embarrassed at handing to so irreproachable-looking a gentleman the small weekly pittance which had been so laboriously earned.

On these Saturday evenings the actor did not dine at home. The ladies were prepared for this. He invariably encountered on the boulevard some old comrade, one out of luck like himself—"there are so many in the profession"—for whom he paid at the restaurant and the café, after which very faithfully, and they were thankful for it, he brought the rest of the money home, sometimes with a bouquet for his wife or a little present for Désirée, a mere nothing, a folly. What more would you have? These are the customs of the theatre. In melodramas one hastens to throw a handful of gold out of the window, exclaiming, "Here you rogue, take this purse and go—tell your mistress I await her."

In spite of their great courage, and although their trade was fairly paid, the Delobelles often found themselves troubled with

cares, especially when there was but little demand for *l' article de Paris*. Happily the good Risler, always ready to oblige his friends, was there.

William Risler, the third lodger on that landing, lived with his brother Frank, who was fourteen years younger than himself. This pair of tall, fair, strong, fresh-coloured Swiss brought into the stuffy atmosphere of the gloomy working house a vision of the country, and a sentiment of health. The elder one was designer in Fromont's manufactory, and paid for the education of his brother who attended the classes at the Collège Chaptal, and was waiting to enter the Ecole Centrale.

Embarrassed with the arrangements of his small household on his arrival in Paris, William Risler received from his neighbours, Mesdames Chèbe and Delobelle, the counsel and direction indispensable to a young fellow, simple, timid, slightly dull and conscious of his foreign accent and appearance. After being neighbours, and rendering mutual services for some time, the brothers Risler became part of the two families. On fête days their meals were always taken with one or other, and it was a great satisfaction to the two exiles to find in these poor homes, modest and straitened though they were, a corner of love and familiar home-life.

The earnings of the designer, who was very clever in his craft, enabled him to be of service to the Delobelles at quarter-day, and to visit the Chèbes like the rich uncle always full of surprises and presents ; so that little Sidonie, when she saw him, ran to his pockets and climbed on his knees. On Sundays he took every one to the theatre ; and almost every evening he went with Chèbe and Delobelle to a "brasserie" in the Rue Blondel where he treated them to beer and *prächtels*. Beer and *prächtels*—that was his weakness. He had no greater pleasure than to sit before a *chope* with his two friends, and to hear them talk, joining only with a loud laugh or a nod of the head in their conversation, which was generally made up of a long string of complaints against society at large.

A childish timidity, a German form of expression, which owing to his life of all-absorbing work still clung to him, caused Risler much embarrassment in communicating his ideas. Moreover, he regarded his friends with a certain degree of awe. In his eyes they possessed the immense superiority of those who do nothing over the man who works. Chèbe, less generous than Delobelle, did not fail to make Risler feel this. He took a very

high tone did Chébe. For him a man working like Risler ten hours a day was incapable of uttering an intelligent opinion. Sometimes the designer coming home tired from the factory, prepared to pass the night in finishing some pressing order. You should have seen the scandalised looks of Chébe on these occasions. "They'd never make me work like that," he would say pompously, then looking Risler straight in the face with the inquisitorial eye of a doctor, he would add, "When once you've had one good attack—" Delobelle was not so ferocious, but he was still more high and mighty. "The cedar does not see a rose at its roots." And Delobelle did not see Risler at his feet.

When by chance he deigned to observe his presence the great man had a certain way of leaning forward to listen to him, and of smiling at his words as at those of a child; or he amused himself by dazzling him with stories of actresses, by giving him lessons in deportment and the addresses of tailors, not understanding how a man who earned so much money could always dress like an usher at a little boys' school. The good Risler, convinced of his inferiority, tried to earn forgiveness by numerous little attentions, feeling bound to treat the pair with the greatest delicacy, since he was their eternal benefactor.

Between the three households on one landing little Sidonie with her perpetual comings and goings formed a bond of union. Every hour of the day she ran into the work-room of the Delobelles amused by their work, looking at the insects; and already more coquettish than playful. If a beetle had lost one of its wings, or a humming-bird its collar of down, she tried to deck herself with the fragments, to fix these showy ornaments in the curls of her fine hair. Désirée and her mother laughed to see her standing on tip-toe to look in the old tarnished glass with simpers and studied attitudes. When she had admired herself sufficiently, the child would open the door with all the strength of her little fingers, and, with head erect for fear of disarranging her head-dress, would gravely knock at the door of Risler's rooms.

During the daytime there was only Frank the schoolboy leaning over his class book, carefully preparing his lessons. When Sidonie entered, it was good-bye to study! Everything must be put aside to receive this handsome lady, bedecked with her humming-bird, this princess, so to speak, who perhaps would condescend to visit him at the Collège Chaptal to ask him in marriage from the principal. It was singular to see the

great overgrown boy playing with this little girl of eight, giving in to her caprices, adoring her unconsciously, so that, later on when he became really in love with her, no one could have told when that love first began.

Petted as she was by both these neighbours, there always came a moment when little Sidonie would escape to the window on the landing. There she still found her greatest amusement, a horizon always open, something of a vision of the future, towards which she inclined with curiosity, and without fear, for children do not turn giddy. Between the slate roofs leaning one against the other, the great wall of the factory, the tops of the plane trees in the garden, the glazed workshops appeared to her like a land of promise, the country of her dreams. For her the house of Fromont was the embodiment of riches. The place it held in this corner of the Marais, enveloped at times in its smoke and noise, the enthusiasm of Risler, his fabulous stories of the wealth, the goodness, and the ability of his employer, awakened the child's curiosity. And all that could be seen of the house, of its fine ornamental shutters, the handsome flight of steps before which were ranged the garden chairs and tables, the grand aviary with its gilt wires that shone resplendent in the sun, the well-equipped blue carriage in the court-yard, these were to her so many objects of constant admiration. She knew all the ways of the house, the hour at which the bell rung, the time the work people left, the Saturday pay-days which kept the cashier's little lamp lighted far into the evening, the long Sunday afternoons when the workshops were closed and the tall chimney fire was out—the great silence during which she could hear the games of Mademoiselle Clara, playing in the garden with her cousin George.

From Risler she obtained details. "Show me the drawing-room window," said she, "and Clara's bedroom," Risler enchanted by this extraordinary sympathy for his beloved factory, explained to the child from the window the arrangement of the building, the printing-room, the gilding-room, the finishing-room, the designing-room where he himself worked, the engine-room whence rose the immense chimney which blackened all the surrounding walls with its smoke, quite unconscious that a little life hidden under a neighbouring roof mingled its most intimate thoughts with the laborious puffs of this indefatigable worker.

One day Sidonie penetrated into this paradise, of which she

had as yet only caught a glimpse. Madame Fromont, to whom Risler often spoke of the prettiness and intelligence of his little neighbour, desired him to bring her to a children's ball she had arranged for Christmas. At first Chèbe replied by a very dry refusal. Even then these Fromonts, whose name was always on Risler's lips, vexed and humiliated him by their wealth. Besides, it was a fancy ball, and M. Chèbe, who did not sell paper-hangings, had not the means of dressing up his daughter like a Columbine. But Risler insisted, declared he would undertake everything, and designed a costume on the spot.

It was a memorable evening. In Madame Chèbe's room, littered with stuffs, pins, and other trifles of the toilette, Désirée presided over the transformation of Sidonie. The little girl looking taller in her short petticoat of red flannel striped with black, stood upright before the glass, motionless amid the glitter of her finery. She was charming in her cross-bar velvet bodice laced over a white stomacher, and with her beautiful long tresses of chestnut hair escaping from under a straw hat; all the somewhat vulgar details of a Swiss costume were elevated by the intelligent countenance and unaffected grace of the child who was quite at her ease in this theatrical attire.

All the neighbours were loud in their admiration. While they were looking for Delobelle, the little cripple arranged the folds of the skirt, and the bows of the shoes, gave a last glance at her work without putting down her needle. She, also, poor child, was excited by the disturbing influence of this fête in which she would take no part.

The great man arrived. He made Sidonie rehearse three fine curtsies he had taught her, and also the way to walk; how to carry herself, how to smile with the mouth roundly opened, leaving just room for the little finger. It was positively comic to see the precision with which the child went through her part. "She has the blood of an artiste in her veins," cried the old actor with enthusiasm, and without knowing why that great booby of a Frank was ready to cry.

A year after that happy evening, had any one questioned Sidonie, she could have described the flowers that decorated the ante-rooms, the colour of the furniture, the dance tune that was being played when she entered the room, so deep had been the impression of her pleasure. She forgot nothing, neither the dresses that whirled around her, the laughter of the children, nor the little feet that tripped so quickly over the polished floor.

One moment seated on the edge of a great red satin sofa, while she took from the tray held before her the first ice she had ever tasted in her life, she thought suddenly of the dark staircase and the small close lodging of her parents, and felt as if these were a far-off country to which she would never return.

As for herself, she was found charming, was admired and caressed by all. Clara Fromont, a miniature Cauchoise peasant all in white lace, introduced her to her cousin George, a magnificent hussar, who turned round at every step to watch the effect of his sword.

"You understand, George, this is my friend. She is coming to play with us on Sundays, mamma says she may."

And with the naive expansion of a happy child, she threw her arms round the little Chèbe, and embraced her with all her heart. At last Sidonie has to go. Long after, in the dark street where the snow was falling, on the gloomy staircase, in the sleeping-chamber where her mother awaited her, the bright light of the ballroom still dazzled her eyes.

"Was it beautiful? Did you enjoy yourself?" asked Madame Chèbe, as she slowly unfastened the hooks of her brilliant costume. Sidonie, worn out with fatigue, fell asleep without answering, beginning a lovely dream that lasted all through her youth, and cost her many tears.

Clara Fromont kept her word. Sidonie frequently went to play in the beautiful gravelled garden and could see the handsome shutters and the aviary with gilded wires quite close. She knew every nook and corner of the immense building, had grand games at hide and seek behind the printing presses in the solitude of the Sunday afternoons, and on fête days she was invited to take her meals with the children. Everybody loved her, without her showing much affection for any one. While she was surrounded by luxury, she became tender, happy, beautified as it were, but, back again with her parents, when she saw the factory from the dull window of the landing she felt a regret and an inexplicable anger. Meanwhile Clara treated her really as her friend. Sometimes she was taken in the famous blue carriage to the Bois de Boulogne or to the Tuileries, sometimes into the country to pass a whole week at the château of Gardinois, Clara's grandfather, at Savigny-sur-Orge. Thanks to the presents of Risler, who was very proud of his little one's success, she was always neat, always well-dressed. Madame Chèbe made this a point of honour, and the pretty

cripple was also there to place treasures of unused coquetry at the service of her little friend.

M. Chèbe, always hostile to the Fromonts, looked with an evil eye on this growing intimacy. The real reason was that he himself was never invited, but he gave other reasons, and said to his wife, "Don't you see then how full the child's heart is when she returns from visiting there, that she passes hours star-gazing from the window?" But poor Madame Chèbe, so unhappy since her marriage, was now without foresight. She maintained that one should enjoy the present, for fear of the future, and should seize happiness as it passes, for frequently one's only consolation and support in life is the remembrance of a happy childhood. For once, however, M. Chèbe was right.

CHAPTER III.

THE HISTORY OF LITTLE SIDONIE—THE IMITATION PEARLS.

AFTER two or three years of intimacy and playing together—years in which Sidonie acquired the luxurious habits and the graceful manners of the children of the wealthy, this friendship was suddenly broken. George, to whom the elder M. Fromont was guardian, had for a long time been at college, and now Clara in her turn left for a convent with the outfit of a little queen, and just at the same time the Chèbes began to consider the question of apprenticing Sidonie. The friends promised eternal fidelity, to see each other twice a month on the going-out Sundays. Sometimes indeed Sidonie went down again to play with her friends, but as she grew older she understood better the distance that separated them, and her dresses began to seem very plain to her for the drawing-room of Madame Fromont. When the three were alone together the childish friendship that made them equals left them free from all constraint, but visitors came, school-friends, among others a tall girl always richly dressed whom her mother's maid brought on Sundays to play with the little Fromonts. Simply on seeing her mount the door-step, bedecked and disdainful, made Sidonie wish to leave at once. The other embarrassed her with

awkward questions. "Where did she live? What were her parents? Had they a carriage?"

When listening to their talk about the convent and their friends, Sidonie felt that they lived in a world apart, a thousand miles from hers, and a great sadness came over her, especially when upon her return her mother spoke of her being apprenticed to Mademoiselle Le Mire a friend of the Delobelles who had a place in the Rue du Roi Doré for the manufacture of imitation pearls. Risler thought highly of this idea of apprenticing Sidonie. "Let her learn a business," said the good-hearted man. "I will engage later on to buy her a stock." And as Mademoiselle Le Mire talked of retiring in a few years the opportunity seemed a favourable one.

It was on a miserable morning in November that her father led her to the Rue du Roi Doré to the fourth floor of an old house, older and dingier than their own. Below, in the corner of the passage, were a crowd of signs inscribed in gilt letters, "Manufactory of Reticules," "Plated Chains," "Children's Toys," "Glass Scientific Instruments," "Bouquets for Brides and Bridesmaids," "Artificial Wild Flowers," and in their midst was a small dusty glass case with necklaces of discoloured false pearls, bunches of glass grapes, and cherries surrounding the pretentious name of Angelina Le Mire. That horrible house! It was not like the Chèbe's large landing, dark with age, but enlivened by its window and the fine view of the factory. A narrow staircase, a narrow door, a suite of rooms with tiled floors, all small and cold, and in the last an old maid with a tower of curls, and black knitted mittens, reading a dirty number of the "Journal pour Tous," and appearing very cross at being interrupted.

Mademoiselle Le Mire received the father and daughter without rising, spoke at length of her former position, of her father, an old gentleman of the Rouergue—it is astounding how many old gentlemen the Rouergue has already produced!—of a faithless steward who had robbed them of their fortune. She was instantly on good terms with M. Chèbe, for whom those who had come down in the world had an irresistible attraction, and that good man went away enchanted, promising to come for his daughter at seven in the evening according to arrangement.

The apprentice was at once introduced into the yet empty workroom and installed by Mademoiselle Le Mire before a large drawer filled with pearls, needles, and bodkins mixed up with

twopenny numbers of novels. Sidonie had to sort the pearls, and to thread them into necklaces of equal length, which are tied together to be sold to small shopkeepers. The other girls on arriving would show her exactly what she had to do, for Mademoiselle Le Mire troubled herself about nothing and distantly overlooked her business from the corner of the dark room where she passed her life in reading novels.

At nine o'clock the work girls came, five tall pale girls, faded, miserably dressed, but with their hair well arranged, with the pretension of poor work girls who habitually go bareheaded through the streets of Paris. Two or three of them yawned and rubbed their eyes saying they were ready to fall asleep—who knows how they had passed the night! After a time they set to work before a large table in which each of them had her drawer and her tools. An order for mourning ornaments had just been received, and despatch was necessary. Sidonie, whom the forewoman with an air of superiority had instructed what to do, commenced sadly sorting a number of black pearls, bunches of imitation black grapes, and ears of corn in *crêpe*. The others without noticing the young girl gossiped as they worked. They spoke of a splendid wedding that was to take place that morning at St. Gervais. "Suppose we go," exclaimed a coarse red-haired girl whom they called Malvina, "it is at twelve o'clock, we shall have time to get there and back if we make haste." So at mid-day the whole band descended into the street four stairs at a time.

Sidonie, who had brought her dinner in a little basket like a school-girl, sat with swelling heart at the corner of the table and ate all alone for the first time. God! how sad and miserable life seemed to her. What a terrible revenge she would take later on for this wretchedness.

At one o'clock the work girls returned very noisy and animated. "Did you notice the white silk dress, and the veil of English point lace. She's a lucky one!" Then in the work-room they all repeated the remarks they had made in an undertone in the church whilst watching the ceremony. This favourite topic of rich marriages and fine dresses lasted the whole day, and did not at all hinder the work.

These little Parisian occupations, connected with the toilette by the most slender details, keep the work girls well posted in the fashions and fill their minds with eternal dreams of luxury and elegance.

For these poor girls at work on Mademoiselle Le Mire's small fourth floor, the grimy walls and the narrow street had no existence. All the time they dreamed of other things, passing their lives in asking, "Now, Malvina, if you were rich what would you do? I should live in the Champs Elysées." And the fine trees of the Rond Point with the carriages that coquettishly and leisurely drive round were for them a momentary vision alike delicious and refreshing.

In her corner Sidonie listened silently, carefully mounting her bunches of black grapes with the precocious skill and taste picked up from her neighbour Désirée, so that in the evening when M. Chêbe came to fetch his child he received the highest compliments.

After that all the days were alike. The next day instead of black pearls she mounted white ones and beads of false coral, for with Mademoiselle Le Mire one worked always in false things—and it was there Sidonie served her apprenticeship to life. For some time the new apprentice, younger and better bred than the others, found herself isolated in their midst. Later on, as she grew up she was admitted to their friendship, their confidences, without ever sharing their pleasures. She was too proud to rush out at lunch time to see weddings, and when she heard them talk of balls at Vauxhall or at the "Délices du Marais," or of a supper at Bonvalet's, or at the "Quatre Sergents de la Rochelle," it was always with feelings of great disdain. We dream of higher things than these, don't we, little Sidonie?

Moreover, her father came to fetch her every evening. Sometimes towards New Year's day she was obliged to work late with the others to finish pressing orders. Under the gaslight these pale Parisian girls picking pearls white as themselves,—a dull unhealthy white—was a painful study. They had the same factitious lustre, the same fragility as the false jewels. They spoke only of masked balls and theatres. "Have you seen Adèle Page in the 'Trois Mousquetaires,' and Marie Laurent, oh! Marie Laurent!" The doublets of the actors, the embroidered robes of the queens of melodrama appeared again to them in the white reflections of the necklaces they rolled over in their hands.

In summer there was less for them to do; it was the slack season. Then during the great heat when behind the closed shutters the hawking of mirabelle plums and greengages was

heard in the street, the work girls slept heavily with their heads on the table, or else Malvina would borrow a "*Journal pour Tous*" from Mademoiselle Le Mire and read aloud to the rest. But Sidonie did not care for novels. She carried one far more interesting than any of these in her head. Nothing made her forget the factory. Leaning on her father's arm in the morning she always threw a glance in the direction of it. At that hour the factory opened, the chimney above shot out its first jet of black smoke. Sidonie in passing heard the cries of the workmen, the dull heavy strokes of the printing-presses, the strong and rhythmic puffing of the machinery, and all these sounds of labour, mingling in her memory with remembrances of fêtes and blue carriages, pursued her incessantly. She heard them above the clatter of the omnibuses, the street cries, the rushing water in the kennels after rain, and even in the work-room while she was sorting her false pearls; at home too in the evening with her parents when she went after dinner to breathe the air at the window on the landing, and gaze at the dark and solitary factory, this active murmur droned continually in her ears and was the regular accompaniment to her thoughts.

"The child is unsettled, Madame Chèbe," said Risler, "we must try and amuse her; next Sunday I shall take you all into the country."

These Sunday walks, which the good Risler arranged in order to amuse Sidonie, made her only the more sad. On these occasions, it was necessary to get up at four o'clock in the morning, for the poor have to pay for all their pleasures; there was always some ribbon to iron or a trimming to sew on at the last moment, in order to freshen up Sidonie's eternal little dress of lilac striped with white, that Madame Chèbe carefully lengthened every year. They set out together, the Chèbes, the Rislers and the illustrious Delobelle, only Désirée and her mother were not with them. The poor crippled girl, humiliated by her deformity, would never leave her couch, and her mother remained behind to keep her company. Besides, neither had a dress fit to be seen by the side of their great man; they would have destroyed all the effect of his appearance.

Sidonie enjoyed the setting out a little,—Paris in the rosy mist of a July morning, the railway stations full of gay toilettes, the country unrolling itself before the carriage windows, the great plunge into fresh air, cooled by the waters of the Seine, enlivened by a woody nook, perfumed by flowery meadows, by

corn in the ear, fascinated her for a minute, but she soon became sickened with the triviality of these Sundays. It was always the same thing. They would stop before a small fried-fish stall, near a noisy and crowded country fair, for Delobelle needed a public. Then carried away by his mania, in his grey suit, grey gaiters, a little hat cocked on one side, and a light overcoat on his arm, he would imagine he was in a theatre, the scene some country place in the environs of Paris, and himself to be acting the part of a ruralizing Parisian.

As for M. Chèbe, who boasted of loving nature like old Jean Jacques himself, he only understood it as connected with gingerbread stalls, wooden horses, sack races, plenty of dust and piping, and this was also Madame Chèbe's ideal of country life. Sidonie indeed had another ideal, and these Parisian Sundays, these noisy promenades in village streets wearied her immensely. Her only pleasure in these crowds was to find herself an object of admiration. No matter how loutish the compliment artlessly expressed aloud within her hearing, it rendered her smiling for the rest of the day; for she was one of those to whom no kind of compliment came amiss.

Sometimes leaving the Chèbes and Delobelle in the crowd, Risler would go into the fields with the young girl and his brother, looking for flowers to serve as models for his designs; Frank with his long arms would pull down clusters of hawthorn, or climb park walls to gather the light foliage growing on the other side. But it was by the water's edge they found their richest harvests. There were some of those little plants with long curved stalks, which have such a pretty effect on wall papers; tall straight reeds and convolvuluses whose flowers, opening suddenly in the fancies of a design, seem like living faces regarding you from the midst of the charming uncertainty of the foliage. Risler grouped his bouquets, arranged them artistically, inspired by the nature of the plants themselves; trying thoroughly to master their natural pose, which is not readily seized after a weary day has passed over them.

The bouquet finished and tied up with a long weed, as with a ribbon, they would set forth again. Risler, while walking, was ever on the look-out for subjects for combinations; "See, little one," he would say, "this spray of lilies-of-the-valley with their white bells amongst the wild roses will look pretty on a sea-green or purple ground." But Sidonie loved neither lilies-of-the-valley nor wild roses. They were to her the flowers

of the poor, something after the style of her lilac dress. She remembered the flowers she had seen at the Château of Savigny, at M. Gardinois' in the greenhouses, in the balcony, and all round the gravelled court bordered with its great vases. Those were the flowers she liked; that was her ideal of the country.

Reminiscences of Savigny crowded upon her at every step. When they passed before the iron gates of a park, she stopped and regarded the straight even drive that led up to the mansion. The greensward, formally shaded by fine trees, the tranquil terraces at the water-side, reminded her of other terraces, of other lawns. These visions of luxury, mingled with remembrances, rendered her Sundays still more doleful.

But it was the return that most afflicted her. The little stations around Paris are so terribly crowded and stifling on these evenings. What affected gaiety! what stupid laughs! what songs shrieked at the top of voices, having only strength to howl! Then it was that M. Chèbe felt in his element. He would fidget about the wicket, grow indignant at the lateness of the train, blame the stationmaster, the company, the government, and say aloud to Delobelle, so as to be heard by everybody near: "Ah! if such a thing were to happen in America." Which, thanks to the expressive behaviour of the illustrious comedian—to the lordly way in which he replied, "I believe you," made everybody suppose that these gentlemen knew exactly what would take place in America in such a case. Yet the one knew no more than the other; still, it made an impression on the crowd.

Sidonie sat by the side of Frank, waiting for the evening train with half of his large bouquet on her lap, as if annihilated in the midst of the tumult. From the station lighted by a single lamp, she could see the woods full of shade here and there pierced by the last illuminations of the fête, a dark country road, people constantly arriving, with a high signal light on some solitary platform. From time to time behind the glazed doors a train passed without stopping, leaving behind a trail of red-hot cinders and a cloud of steam. Then a tempest of cries would ensue accompanied by the stamping of feet, above which was heard the shrill soprano of M. Chèbe exclaiming, "Break the doors open, break the doors open!" A thing the little man took good care not to do himself, for he had a mortal fear of gendarmes.

After a moment the storm subsided. The tired women with

their hair dishevelled slept on the benches. There were rumpled dresses, torn clothes, white toilettes smothered with dust. It was dust that one breathed everywhere. It came from everybody's garments, rose at every step, obscured the light from the lamp, irritated the eyes, fell like a cloud over the tired travellers, and the carriages which came up after hours of waiting were more or less filled with it. When the train started Sidonie opened the window and looked out on the dark plains, a line of shadow without end. Soon like innumerable stars the first lights of the outer boulevards appeared near the fortifications, and thus ended the terrible day of rest for the poor. The sight of Paris reminded each of his work on the morrow.

Sad as her Sunday might have been, Sidonie could not avoid regretting it. She thought of the rich to whom every day of life is a day of rest; and vaguely as in a dream the long vistas of the parks seen during the day, appeared to her full of those fortunate ones promenading on the fine gravel walks, while at the gates beyond in the dust of the road, the poor, on their Sunday, hurried along hardly able to spare a minute to gaze and envy.

From thirteen to seventeen years of age, such was the life of little Sidonie. These years passed away without bringing the least change—the cashmere shawl of Madame Chèbe was a little more worn, the lilac frock had been repaired once or twice, and that was all. Only as Sidonie grew up, Frank now become a young man gave her silent and tender looks and loving attentions that were visible to all the world, and which the young girl alone failed to perceive.

Nothing interested this little Sidonie. At the workshop she accomplished her regular task silently without the least thought of the future. All she did seemed to be done with the air of one who waits. Frank, on the contrary, had for some time worked with singular energy, with the zest of one who has an object in his efforts, and with such success, that at the age of twenty-four he came out second from the Ecole Centrale with the grade of engineer.

That evening Risler took the Chèbe family to the Gymnase Theatre, and all through the performance Madame Chèbe and he made a succession of signs behind the backs of the young people. Finally, on leaving Madame Chèbe, placed Sidonie's arm under that of Frank, in a way that said to the lover, "Now, explain yourself, it's your affair!" Then the poor lover tried to make himself understood.

The way is long from the Gymnase to the Marais. After a few steps the splendour of the boulevards disappears, the streets become more and more sombre, the passers-by more and more rare. Frank began by talking of the play. He liked those comedies in which there was sentiment. "And you, Sidonie?" "Oh, I! you know, Frantz, as long as there are dresses—" In fact at the theatre she thought of nothing else. She was not one of those sentimentalists who return from the play with love-speeches learnt by heart, and the conventional ideal. No, the theatre gave her only a mad desire for luxury and elegance. She brought away nothing but models of head-dresses and patterns of robes. The new and exaggerated toilettes of the actresses, their gait, even their falsely fashionable intonations which seemed to her distinction itself; and with that the flimsy dazzling of the gilding and the lights, the illuminated bills at the doors, the carriages in waiting, all the somewhat unwholesome uproar that circles round a successful piece—these were what Sidonie loved and was impressed by.

The lover continued, "How well they acted the love-scene." And in saying that word "love," he inclined tenderly towards a pretty little head enveloped in a white woollen hood from which the hair escaped in straggling curls.

Sidonie sighed. "Oh! yes, the love scene, the actress wore some splendid diamonds."

Then there was a pause. Poor Frank was sadly troubled to explain himself; the words he wanted would not come; besides he lacked courage. He kept postponing his declaration, saying to himself, "When we have passed the Porte St. Denis, when we have left the Boulevards, I will speak out." But just then Sidonie commenced talking of such indifferent things that his words froze on his lips, or were checked by some carriage rattling by. At length in the Marais he summoned up the necessary resolution to say, "Listen to me, Sidonie,—I love you!"

That night the Delobelles had sat up very late. It was the habit of those courageous women to make the day of work last as long as possible, to prolong it so far into the night that their lamp was one of the last to be extinguished in the quiet Rue de Braque. Before going to bed they waited for the return of the great man for whom they were keeping a comforting little supper hot in the embers on the hearth. During the time when he performed there was a reason for this. Actors, obliged to dine early and lightly, leave the stage with a voracious appe-

tite. Delobelle, however, had not played for a long time ; but lacking the right, as he said, to give up the stage, he humoured his hobby by a number of stroller's habits, and supper on getting home was one of them, like his nightly return after the last of the theatres had extinguished its gas. To go to bed without supper at the same hour as everybody else would have been to abdicate, to give up the struggle. And he never would give up, *sacrebleu !*

On the night of which we speak the actor had not yet come home, and the two women waited chatting and working, very lively in spite of the lateness of the hour. All the evening they had talked of Frank and of his success and the career that was before him. "Now," said Madame Delobelle, "he wants nothing but a good little wife."

Désirée thought the same. All Frank wanted was a little wife, active, courageous, accustomed to work, and who would altogether forget herself for him. And if Désirée spoke with such assurance, it was because she really knew the woman who was suited to Frank Risler. She was only one year younger than he, just what is wanted, to be younger than one's husband and to be able to be a mother to him at the same time. Pretty ? No, not exactly, but pretty rather than plain, in spite of her being lame, poor girl, and besides, clever, sprightly, and so loving ! None but Désirée knew how fondly she loved Frank, and how for years past he had occupied her thoughts night and day. And he himself had not perceived it, and seemed to have eyes only for Sidonie, a good-for-nothing child. But, never mind, silent love is so eloquent, such a great force lies hidden behind restrained feelings. Who knows, some day or other—

The little cripple bending over her work set out on one of those great journeys to the land of dreams of which she made so many from her cripple's couch, while her feet rested on the motionless stool, one of those marvellous journeys from which she always returned happy and smiling, hanging on the arm of Frank with all the confidence of a beloved wife. Her fingers followed the dream of her heart, the little bird she held at the moment, smoothing its ruffled wings, had the very air of being bound on a voyage, as if it too would fly far away, joyous and light as she.

Suddenly the door opened, "Do I disturb you?" said a triumphant voice.

The mother, a little drowsy, raised her head quickly. "Ah ! 'tis Monsieur Frank. Come in, Monsieur Frank, you see we are waiting for papa, those rogues of artistes are always so late. Sit down there ; have some supper with him."

"Oh, no, thanks," cried Frank whose lips were still pale with the emotion he had just gone through. "Thanks, but I won't stay. I saw your light at the door, and I only came to tell you some great news that you will be glad to hear, because I know you love me."

"Great heavens ! what is it ?"

"There is a promise of marriage between Monsieur Frank Risler and Mademoiselle Sidonie !"

"There now, I told you he only wanted a good little wife," said the mother, getting up to embrace him.

Désirée could not utter a single word. She bent more over her work, and as Frank's eyes were fixed only on his own happiness and the mother was looking at the clock to see if her great man would soon return, no one saw the poor cripple's emotion, her pallor, or the convulsive trembling of the little bird in her hand, its head hanging downwards like a bird wounded unto death.

CHAPTER IV.

HISTORY OF LITTLE SIDONIE—THE GLOW-WORMS OF SAVIGNY.

"Savigny-sur-Orge.

"MY DEAR SIDONIE,—Yesterday we were at dinner in the great dining-room that you know, with the door opening on to the steps covered with flowers. I felt rather dull, grandpapa had been in a bad temper all the morning, and my poor mother dared not say a word, fearful of his frowns which have always been her law. I felt it was really a pity to be so much alone in the height of summer in this beautiful country, and I shall be very happy, now that I have left the convent and am destined to pass entire seasons in the country, to have some one as formerly to run with me in the woods and lanes. George indeed comes now and then, but he always arrives so late, just in time for dinner,

and is off again with my father in the morning before I am awake. For he is now a business man, this M. George. He works at the factory, and business cares often make him also knit his brows.

"I had got thus far in my reflections when all at once grand-papa turned quickly to me saying: 'What's become of your little Sidonie? I should like to have her here sometimes.' You can imagine how happy I was, what joy to renew that friendship which the accidents of life and not our wills interrupted! what a number of things we shall have to tell one another! you, who alone could pacify my terrible grandpapa, you will come and bring us gaiety, and I assure you we need it.

"It is so lonely, this beautiful Savigny. Imagine to yourself a morning when I feel coquettishly inclined. I dress, I make myself fine, curling my hair, and with a pretty toilette, I go up and down the walks, and suddenly I perceive I have made all these efforts simply for the swans, the ducks, and my dog Kiss; for the cows in the meadow do not even turn their heads when I pass. Then I feel vexed, rush home and put on a print dress and go to amuse myself in the farm, the pantry, a little everywhere. And really I begin to believe that ennui has perfected me, and that I shall make an excellent housekeeper.

"Happily the shooting season will soon begin, and then I hope for a little change. George and my father, who are both great sportsmen, generally come. Besides, you will be here. For you are going to answer at once that you are coming, are you not? M. Risler said lately you were unwell. The air of Savigny will do you great good. Every one expects you, and I can no longer live through impatience. CLARA."

This letter finished, Clara Fromont put on a large straw hat, for those early August days were hot and splendid, and went herself to post her letter in the little box which the postman cleared every morning in passing the château. It was at the end of the park at the corner of the road. She stopped one minute to look at the trees by the wayside, and the surrounding meadows sleeping in the sunlight. Beyond, some reapers were gathering the last sheaves, and men were ploughing a little way off. All the melancholy of silent labour had, however, disappeared for the young girl who was full of joy at the thought of again seeing her friend. No whisper rose from the high hills of the horizon, no voice came from the summit of the trees to warn

her by presentiment, to prevent her sending that fatal letter. On returning to the house she began at once to prepare for Sidonie a pretty room adjoining her own.

The letter made its journey faithfully. From the little green gate of the château surrounded with clematis and honeysuckle, it travelled to Paris, arriving the same evening, with its stamp of Savigny, all perfumed with the air of the country, at the fifth floor of the house in the Rue de Braque. What an event it was! The letter was read three times, and for eight days—until Sidonie's departure—it rested on the chimney piece near some relics of Madame Chébe's, near the globe clock and a pair of vases of the First Empire.

For Sidonie it was like a marvellous romance, full of enchantment and promise, that she read without opening, by simply regarding the white envelope containing Clara's monogram. It is little she thinks of marriage now! The first essential was to know what dresses to take to the château. It was necessary to set to work on these, to cut, combine, contrive, to try on frocks and bonnets.

Unhappy Frank, how these preparations made his heart ache! This departure for Savigny which he had vainly opposed, delayed their marriage—and without his knowing why, Sidonie got more and more distant every day. He could not go and see her at Savigny, and she once there, in the midst of fêtes and pleasures, who could tell how long she would stay? It was always to the ladies Delobelle the despairing lover carried his confidences without noticing once how Désirée rose quickly, when he entered, to make room for him at the work-table near her, and how she sat down again directly with flushed face and brilliant eyes.

For several days no work had been done in beetles and birds. Mother and daughter hemmed the rose-coloured flounce destined for Sidonie's dress, and never had the cripple sewn before with such good will. Not for nothing was she Delobelle's daughter, this poor Désirée. She inherited from her father the facility to imagine and hope to the end.

While Frank related his love-troubles, Désirée thought that, Sidonie once away, he would come in this manner every day, if only to speak of the absent one, that she would have him there quite near her, that they would sit up together waiting for her father, and that perhaps one evening, looking at her, he would perceive the difference there is between the woman that loves

you and the woman that permits you to love her. So the idea that every stitch in the dress hastened this impatiently expected departure, gave to her needle an extraordinary activity, and the poor lover saw with terror the flounces and the frills gather around her like foaming little waves.

When the rose-coloured dress was finished, Mademoiselle Chèbe departed for Savigny. The château of M. Gardinois was situate in the valley of the Orge, beside that little river so capriciously beautiful, with its mills, its islets, its sluices, and its great reaches of park-like turf which border its banks their entire length. The house, an old house of the time of Louis XV., not very elevated in its walls, and high only in the roof, had a noble air of melancholy and a decided appearance of aristocratic antiquity, with its grand doorways, balconies of rusted iron, old vases worn with rain, with fresh young flowers emerging from the ruddy-coloured stone. As far as one could see, the walls of the park extended, worn and leaning, descending slightly down to the river. They were overlooked by the château, with its great slate roof, by the farm with its red tiles, and by the marvellous limes, poplars, ash, and chestnut trees of the park, mingling together in a dark bosky tract that opened here and there into avenues.

But the charm of this old property was the water, the water that animated its silence and solemnised its aspect. At Savigny, besides the river, there were springs and fountains, lakes into which the sun went down in all his glory. These harmonised well with the old mansion, moss-grown and mouldy, and somewhat worn like a stone on the borders of a brook.

Unfortunately at Savigny, as at most of those Parisian summer-palaces, which the mushrooms of commerce and speculation have made their prey, the castellans were not in harmony with the castle. Since he bought his château, old Gardinois had done his best to spoil what fate had given to him so rich in beauty. He cut down trees "for the view," bristled the park with formal fences against marauders, and preserved all his solicitude for a superb kitchen-garden, which, as it yielded quantities of fruit and vegetables, seemed more like his own private land, the land of a peasant.

As to the great saloons with their painted panels faded like autumn mists, as to the pieces of water overrun with water-lilies, the grottos, and the rock-work bridges, he cared for them only because of the admiration of visitors, and because all these

made up the thing that so flattered the vanity of the retired old cattle-dealer—a château.

Already old and unable to hunt or fish, he passed his time in overlooking the petty details of this immense property. The grain given to the fowls, the price of the last hay sold, the number of bundles of straw in a magnificent round granary, gave him enough to grumble at for a whole day, and certainly when one viewed at a distance this beautiful Savigny, the château on the slope, the river running before it like a mirror, the high terraces darkened with ivy, the layers of stones sustaining the park against the grand declivity of the land, one would never have suspected the niggardliness, the mean spiritedness of the owner.

In the indolence of his wealth, M. Gardinois, weary of Paris, lived here all the year round, and here in the fine season the Fromonts bore him company. Madame Fromont was a woman of weak disposition, and unintelligent, whom the hard tyranny of her father had early broken into passive and perpetual obedience. She assumed the same attitude with her husband, whose goodness and constant indulgence had no power to change her nature, humble, silent, indifferent—almost as it were irresponsible. Having always lived away from business she had become rich without perceiving it, and without the slightest wish to profit by it. Her beautiful home in Paris and the sumptuous house of her father embarrassed her, and she made herself as unimportant as possible. Her life was absorbed by a single passion. Order—a monstrous, fantastical sort of order that consisted in brushing, polishing, dusting and making shine with her own hands the mirrors, the ornaments and the door-mouldings.

When she had nothing else left to clean, this strange woman would set to work on her rings, her watch-chain, and her brooches, would clean her cameos and her pearls, and by dint of polishing her own and husband's name on her wedding-ring had succeeded in effacing all the letters. She followed her passion at Savigny. She gathered up the dead wood in the paths, scraped the moss off the seats with the point of her parasol, and would have liked to dust the leaves and sweep the trunks of the old trees. Often on the railway, she envied the little villas along the line, all so clean and prim and with their tiny rectangular gardens looking very much like the open drawer of a chest of drawers. This was her type of a country house.

M. Fromont, who paid only flying visits, and was always absorbed in business, cared little for Savigny either; Clara alone was thoroughly at home in the fine park, she knew every bush in it. Like all solitary children, obliged to provide amusement for herself she found delight in certain walks, watched the blooming of particular flowers, had her favourite paths, her favourite tree, her favourite seat for reading. She came in to meals breathless and contented bathed in the pure air. The shade of the hedges had lent a melancholy sweetness to her young forehead, and the green depths of the pools streaked with sunbeams reappeared in her large eyes.

This beautiful country-seat had really preserved her from the vulgarity and lowness of her surroundings; M. Gardinois might deplore before her for hours the perversity of tradesmen and of servants, and reckon up what he was cheated out of every month, every week, every day, every minute; Madame Fromont might enumerate her complaints against the mice, the mites, the dust, the damp—all conspiring against her cupboards and bent on the destruction of her property; not a syllable of these silly remarks remained in the mind of Clara. A ramble round the lawn, a chapter read beside the pool, was enough to restore calm and happiness to this generous and well conditioned mind.

Her grandfather looked on her as a strange creature quite out of place in that family. Child as she was she already embarrassed him with her great clear eyes, her just sense of all things, and because he could not recognise in her his own passive and submissive daughter. "She will be proud and an original like her father," said he, on days of bad temper.

Little Sidonie pleased him much more when she came to play now and then in the garden of Savigny. Here at any rate he recognised a common nature like his own, with a grain of ambition and of envy that was already revealed by a certain little smile in the corner of her mouth. Moreover the young girl showed an astonishment and artless admiration of his riches that flattered his parvenu's vanity; and sometimes, when he teased her, she brought out queer Parisian words: expressions peculiar to the faubourgs and set off by her sharp and slightly pale yet pretty face, in which triviality was mingled with a certain distinction. So that the old fellow had never forgotten her.

This time especially, when after her long absence Sidonie

returned with her wavy hair, her pretty figure, her mobile and lively countenance all heightened by the somewhat affected elegancies of the shop-girl, she met with much success. Old Gardinois, astonished to see a fine young woman instead of the child he expected, found her much prettier and especially much better dressed than Clara.

The truth is that on alighting from the train Mademoiselle Chèbe, seated in the open carriage of the château did not cut such a bad appearance: still she lacked what constituted the beauty and the charm of her friend—her manners, bearing, contempt for attitudinizing, and above all her serenity of mind. The grace of Sidonie slightly resembled her dresses—cheap stuffs, but cut in the taste of the day, shoddy if you will, but shoddy to which that absurd and charming fairy Fashion had imparted shape, ornament and colour. Paris has countless little faces made expressly for showing off toilettes of this kind, and which are easy enough to coif and dress because they belong to no decided type—Mademoiselle Chèbe's was a face of this description.

What a delight it was for her when the carriage entered the long avenue of soft green turf bordered by centenarian elms, at the end of which Savigny awaited her with its doors thrown wide open. From this day forward, Sidonie realised the enchanted existence of which she had so long dreamed. Luxury presented itself to her in all its forms, from the magnificence of the saloons, the great loftiness of the apartments, the floral riches of the conservatory and the elegance of the stables down to those small details—in which it seemed to concentrate itself as it were like an exquisite perfume, one drop of which suffices to scent an entire room—such as the baskets of flowers on the tablecloth, the grave air of the servants, the dejected and weary "Take away," of Madame Fromont.

And how thoroughly at home Sidonie felt amid all these refinements of wealth! How perfectly this kind of existence suited her! It seemed to her that she had never known any other.

Suddenly in the midst of her intoxication a letter came from Frank which brought her back to the hard reality of her existence, to her miserable condition as the future wife of a journeyman engineer; and placed her against her will in the mean little apartment they would one day occupy at the top of some dingy house, the air of which, heavy and dense with misery, she seemed already to breathe.

Should she break off her marriage? She certainly could do so, for she had given no other pledge than her word. Still who knows, that chance lost, she might after all regret it?

In that little head mad with ambition the strangest ideas clashed together. Sometimes, when old grandfather Gardinois, who had given up his old shooting-coat and his woollen vest in her honour, joked with her and amused himself by contradicting her, in the hope of drawing forth rather free repartees. But she would look at him full in the eyes without answering, fixedly, coldly, thinking to herself, "Oh! if you were but ten years younger!" But the notion of becoming Madame Gardinois did not last long. A new individual, a new hope entered into her life.

Since Sidonie came to stay at Savigny, George Fromont, instead of being there only on Sundays, had taken to coming to dinner almost every day. He was a tall, slight, pale young fellow, of elegant appearance. Having neither father nor mother, he had been brought up by his uncle M. Fromont, and it was intended he should succeed to the business, and apparently also become the husband of Clara. This settled future did not excite his enthusiasm. In the first place, business bored him, whilst between him and his cousin there existed the intimacy of two children, brought up together, the mutual confidence inspired by habit, but nothing more—on his side at least.

With Sidonie, on the contrary, he felt embarrassed and timid at the very outset, yet at the same time was desirous of producing an effect—felt in fact quite changed. She had the artificial, slightly meretricious grace likely to please this foppish nature, and it was not long before she perceived the impression she had made on him.

When the two young girls walked in the park it was invariably Sidonie who remembered the time of the Paris train. They would go together to the gate to wait for the travellers, and George's first look was always for Mademoiselle Chèbe, standing a little behind her friend, in a posture and with an air designed to catch the eyes at once. This intrigue between the pair lasted for some time. They never spoke of love, but all the words and smiles they exchanged were full of avowals and reticencies.

One cloudy and sultry summer evening, when the two girls had risen from the table as soon as dinner was over to walk beneath the long arcade of yoke elms, George followed them. The three talked together on indifferent matters, the pebbles

clattering under their feet as they strolled slowly up and down, when the voice of Madame Fromont was heard calling to Clare from the château. George and Sidonie were left alone—they continued their walk along the path guided by the dim whiteness of the gravel, without speaking and without drawing nearer to each other.

A cool wind swept through the leafy arcade, and under its influence the wavelets of the agitated pool beat against the arches of the little bridge, whilst the acacias and the limes, whose flowers were whirling from their stalks, perfumed the sultry air. They felt themselves in a stormy atmosphere, vibrating, penetrating. And across the depths of their troubled eyes there passed great hot flashes like those that illumined the distant horizon.

“Oh the beautiful glow-worms!” exclaimed the young girl, whom the silence, broken by mysterious sounds, embarrassed. On the edge of the lawn flickering little green lights intermittently illumined the blades of grass, and she stooped to place one of them on her glove. George knelt beside her, and bending down towards the grass with their hair and cheeks touching, they looked at each other for a minute by the light from the glow-worms. How strange and charming she appeared to him, seen by the green reflections that lit up her lowered face and formed a halo in the fine network of her waving hair. He had passed his arm round her waist, and all at once, feeling that she abandoned herself to him, clasped her long and passionately to his side.

“What are you looking for?” cried Clara, emerging suddenly from the deep shade behind them.

George, startled and breathless, trembled so much that he could make no reply, but Sidonie rose up with the most perfect calm and said, as she shook out her dress, “They are glow-worms, see what a number there are this evening and how they shine!” Her eyes also sparkled with extraordinary brilliancy.

“It is the storm, no doubt,” said George still shivering, and in fact the storm was near. Every moment a great whirlwind of leaves and dust coursed from one end of the arcade to the other. They all three walked about a little longer, and then returned to the drawing-room. The girls took up their work, George tried to read a paper; while Madame Fromont polished her rings, and M. Gardinois played at billiards with his son-in-law in the adjoining room.

How long the evening seemed to Sidonie, how she wished to be alone and free to think! At last in the silence of her bedroom, when she had put out the light, which disturbs dreams by showing us realities too vividly, what projects she formed, what transports of joy she experienced! George loved her! George Fromont the heir to the factory! They would be married; she would be rich. For in this venal little mind the first kiss of love only gave birth to plans of ambition and luxury.

To make quite sure that her lover was in earnest she went again and again over the minutest details of the scene beneath the arcade; the expression of his eyes, the ardour of his embrace, the vows stammered lip to lip by the misty light of the glow-worms—that solemn moment was fixed for ever in her heart.

Oh the glow-worms of Savigny! All that night they twinkled like stars before Sidonie's closed eyes. The park was full of them to the very end of its darkest avenues. They were in clusters the entire length of the sward, on the trees, in the groves. The fine gravel of the paths, the waves of the pools swarmed with green stars; and all these microscopic lights made as it were a festive illumination with which Savigny seemed to deck itself in her honour—to celebrate the betrothal of George and Sidonie.

When she rose in the morning her plans were all arranged. George loved her, of that she was certain. Did he think of marrying her? She thought not, sharp little blade. But this did not frighten her. She felt strong enough to guide his childish nature, at once weak and passionate. She had but to resist him; and that is what she did.

For several days she was cold, inattentive, intentionally blind and forgetful. He tried to speak to her, to revert to that entranced moment, but she avoided him, always placing some one between himself and her. At last he wrote and regularly deposited his letters in a crevice of rock near a limpid spring, called "Le Fantôme," covered in with a thatched roof at the furthest corner of the park.

Sidonie found this charming. In the evening it was necessary to lie, to invent some pretext or other for running all alone to the "Fantôme." The shadows of the trees across the walks, the darkness of the night, the run, the emotion, made her heart beat with delicious excitement. By the bright light of the

moon she found the letter wet with dew, impregnated with the intense cold of the spring, and looking so white by the light of the moon that she hid it quickly for fear of being surprised. Then when alone, what joy it was to open it and decipher the magical characters, the phrases of love, the words of which were iridescent, surrounded with circles, blue, yellow, dazzling, as if she had read her letter in the brilliant sunlight.

"I love you! Love me," wrote George in every kind of form. At first she did not answer, but when she considered him really caught, really hers, and exasperated by her coldness, she declared herself plainly:

"I can never love any one but my husband." Ah! she was already a true woman, this little Sidonie.

CHAPTER V.

HOW THE HISTORY OF LITTLE SIDONIE ENDED.

SEPTEMBER came at last, and the shooting brought a number of noisy and vulgar visitors to the château. There were long meals over which these rich citizens lingered with the deliberation, lassitude, and drowsiness of peasants. The ladies went in carriages to meet the sportsmen along roads, already chilly in the autumn twilight. The mist rose from the stubble-fields; and while the game skimmed across the ridges with cries of fear, the night seemed to creep forth from the depths of the woods, the dark masses of which spread over the plain. The carriage lamps being lighted, the ladies warm beneath the unrolled rugs, but with the wind blowing freshly in their faces, returned quickly to the château. Then the dining-room, magnificently lit up, was speedily full of life and laughter.

Clara Fromont, embarrassed by the coarseness of the company, spoke but little. Sidonie, on the other hand, shone with all her brilliancy. The drive had heightened her pale complexion and brightened her Parisian eyes. She understood when to laugh, and perhaps understood a little too much; but to the men assembled there, she seemed to be the only woman present.

Her success intoxicated George, but in proportion as he advanced, she showed herself the more reserved.

From that time he resolved to make her his wife. He swore it to himself with all the exaggerated affirmation of those weak natures, who seem always to combat beforehand the objection in presence of which they know they will one day give in.

These were the brightest moments of Sidonie's life. Even apart from all ambitious designs, her coquettish and dissimulating nature found a strange pleasure in a love intrigue, mysteriously carried on amid festivities and fêtes.

No one about them suspected anything. Clara was at that healthy and charming period of youth when the half-expanded spirit attaches itself to the object it knows with blind confidence, completely incredulous of falsehood or treason. M. Fromont was absorbed in business; his wife cleaned her jewellery frantically. There was only old Gardinois and his little gimlet eye to fear, but Sidonie amused him, and even if he had discovered anything, he was not the man to spoil her future.

She was triumphant, when an accident, sudden and unforeseen, occurred to annihilate her hopes.

One Sunday morning, M. Fromont was borne home mortally wounded from a battue. A ball, destined for a buck, had struck him near the temple.

The château was thrown into confusion. All the sportsmen, among whom was the unknown bungler, returned hastily to Paris. Clara, stupefied with grief, would not leave the room where her father lay in his last agony. Risler, informed of the catastrophe, came quickly to fetch Sidonie away.

Before leaving, she had a last meeting with George at the "Fantôme," the farewell meeting, painful and furtive, rendered solemn by the near presence of death. They swore to love each other always, they settled on a place to write to, and they separated.

Her return was sad. She came back to the old every-day life, escorted by the despair of Risler, to whom the death of his dear master was an irreparable loss. Once more at home, she was obliged to relate the minutest details of her visit, to talk about the inmates of the château, the guests, the fêtes, the dinners, the disaster at the end. How painful all this was for her who, absorbed in one thought, had such need of silence and solitude. Still this was not her greatest trial.

From the first day, Frank assumed his accustomed place; his looks seeking hers, his words addressed to her alone, seemed an intolerable exaction. In spite of his timidity and lack of confidence, the poor fellow believed in his rights as an accepted and impatient lover, and little Sidonie was obliged to come out of her dreamland to answer this creditor and put off pay-day as late as possible.

There came a time, however, when indecision no longer availed her. She had promised to marry Frank when he had a position, and lo! a place is offered him as engineer in the South, at the mines of Grand-Combe. Here was sufficient for a modest household. There was no way of retreat for her. She must fulfil her promise or find a pretext. But how—what?

In this pressing danger she thought of Désirée. Although the little cripple had not made her her confidant, Sidonie knew her great love for Frank. For a long time past had she discerned it with her coquette's eyes, clear and changing mirrors which reflected all the thoughts of others without ever showing her own. Perhaps this idea that another woman loved her betrothed had at first rendered the love of Frank more supportable, and as we place statues over tombs in order to render them less sad, so the pretty little pale face of Désirée on the threshold of this dark future made it appear to Sidonie less sinister. In her present emergency this furnished her with an honourable and easy pretext for disengaging herself from her promise.

"No! you see, mother," said she one day to Madame Chèbe, "I will never consent to make a friend like her wretched. I should feel too much remorse. Poor Désirée! haven't you noticed her sad looks since my return, with what a supplicating air she looks at me. No, I will never cause her so much pain. I will not rob her of her Frank."

Whilst admiring her daughter's goodness of heart, Madame Chèbe considered this sacrifice exaggerated, and made objections. "Take care, my child," said she, "we are not rich, a husband like Frank does not turn up every day."

"So much the worse, I shall never marry," answered Sidonie abruptly, and having found a good excuse she clung to it with energy. Nothing would alter this resolution, not the tears of Frank who was exasperated by a refusal enveloped in vague reasons that were not even explained to him, nor the entreaties of Risler to whom Madame Chèbe, with a great air of mystery,

had confided the objections of her child, and who in spite of all could not help admiring such a sacrifice.

"Don't blame her, she is an angel," said he to his brother, trying to calm him.

"Oh yes, she is an angel," repeated Madame Chèbe, sighing in such a manner that the poor tricked lover had not even the right to complain. Rendered desperate, he resolved to leave Paris, and in his desire to fly, Grand-Combe seemed too near, and he solicited and obtained an appointment as superintendent at Ismailia on the works of the Isthmus of Suez.

Frank left without knowing or wishing to know anything of the love of Désirée, and yet when he went to say good-bye the dear little cripple raised to him her beautiful timid eyes in which was plainly written "I love you if she does not." But Frank Risler could not read those eyes. Poor Désirée! Happily hearts accustomed to suffer have infinite patience. Her lover gone, the little cripple with that grain of illusion which she inherited from her father, refined by her woman's nature, bravely resumed her work, saying, "I can wait, I will wait for him." And from that time she expanded widely all the wings of her birds, as if they were setting out one after the other for Ismailia in Egypt, and that was a very long way off.

From Marseilles, before embarking, young Risler wrote again to Sidonie, a last letter, comical, and touching at the same time, in which technical details were mingled with heart-rending farewells. The unhappy engineer declared that he set out with a broken heart on board the transport *Sahib*, "an auxiliary screw of fifteen-hundred horse-power," as if he hoped that so great an amount of steam power would impress the faithless one and cause her eternal remorse. But Sidonie had altogether other things in her head.

She began to grow uneasy at the silence of George. Since her departure from Savigny she had had news of him once, but since then nothing. All her letters remained unanswered. It is true she knew from Risler that George was very busy and that his uncle's death, leaving him the entire management of the factory, had imposed on him a responsibility beyond his strength. Still it was strange of him not to write one word!

At the landing-window where she had resumed her silent place, for she had arranged not to return to Mademoiselle Le Mire, little Sidonie sought to catch sight of her lover and watched his goings and comings in the court-yards and build-

ings. And in the evening, towards the hour when the train started for Savigny, she would see him enter his carriage to go to rejoin his aunt and cousin who were passing the first month of mourning in the country with the old grandfather. All this agitated and frightened her, and above all the proximity of the factory rendered the estrangement of George still more evident. To think that by calling out loudly she could make him turn towards her! To think that merely a wall separated them! And yet at that moment they were very far apart from each other.

You remember, little Sidonie, the sad winter evening when the good Risler entered your parents' apartment with an extraordinary air, saying, "Great news." And it was great news indeed.

George Fromont had just told him, that, in accordance with the last wishes of his uncle, he was about to marry his cousin Clara, and that feeling decidedly unable to carry on the factory alone he had resolved to take him into partnership and give to the firm the title of "FROMONT THE YOUNGER AND RISLER THE ELDER."

However did you contrive, Sidonie, to keep calm when you heard that the factory had escaped you, and that another woman had taken your place. It was indeed a wretched evening. Madame Chèbe was stitching at the table, M. Chèbe was drying his clothes, saturated with the rain, at the fire. Oh wretched home, full of misery and weariness. The lamp burned badly, the supper, quickly despatched, had left in the room a smell of cooking. And this Risler, intoxicated with joy, kept on talking, getting more and more animated, and laying out plans. All these things made your heart sick, and the treason seemed still more frightful to you, by the comparison of the riches that were fleeing from your outstretched hand, with this vile low-class existence which you were condemned to endure.

It made Sidonie seriously ill for a long time. As she lay in her bed whenever the shaken windows rattled behind the curtains, the wretched girl always believed that George's wedding carriages were passing below in the street. And she had nervous fits, dumb, inexplicable, like to a fever of rage consuming her.

At last, youth, and the care of her mother, and above all that of Désirée, who now knew the sacrifice which had been made for her, brought her illness to a close. But for a long

time afterwards Sidonie remained in a very weak state, oppressed by an extreme sadness and a nervous desire to weep. At times she spoke of travelling, of quitting Paris—at other times she wished to enter a convent. Those around her were much afflicted and sought the cause of this singular condition, still more distressing than her illness even, when all at once she confessed to her mother the cause of her miseries. She loved the elder Risler! Never had she dared to own it, but it was him she had always loved and not his brother Frank.

This news astonished every one, and Risler most of all—but little Sidonie was so pretty, she looked at him with such soft eyes, that the brave fellow all at once became blindly in love. Perhaps, without his being aware of it, this love had been at the bottom of his heart for a long time since.

So this is how it came to pass that on the evening of their wedding, young Madame Risler, all white in her wedding dress, looked with a smile of triumph at the landing-window where ten years of her life had been closely caged. This proud smile—with which was blended profound pity and some little contempt, such as one lately enriched might have for the meanness of her beginnings—was evidently addressed to the poor and sickly-looking child whom she imagined she saw facing her above, in the depths of the past, and of the night, and seemed to say to her, pointing to the factory, "What do you say to this, little Sidonie? You see I am here now!"

BOOK II.

CHAPTER I.

MY WIFE'S DAY "AT HOME."

It is mid-day. The Marais is at breakfast. With the sonorous vibrations of the angelus from the belfries of St. Paul, St. Gervais, St. Denis and the Holy Sacrament, there mingles, rising from the courts, the shrill sounds of the factory bells. Each of these chimes has a distinct physiognomy. Some are sad, some gay, some alert, and some sleepy. There are wealthy and fortunate bells ringing for hundreds of workmen; and poor and timid bells, that seem to hide behind the others and make themselves quite small as if they dreaded bankruptcy would hear them. Beside these, there are lying and impudent bells which sound for the outside world, for the street, to make believe that they belong to a large business employing many hands. Thank heaven, the bell of Fromont's factory is not one of these. It is a good old bell, a little cracked, known in the Marais for forty years, one that has never rested excepting on Sundays and days of popular tumult.

At its voice a whole crowd of work-people file beneath the gateway of the old mansion, and drift into the neighbouring wine-shops. The apprentices seat themselves on the curb-stone beside some stone-masons. To secure themselves half-an-hour's playtime they breakfast in five minutes on anything that is hawked about Paris for passers-by and the poor; chestnuts, walnuts, apples, and the like; whilst beside them the masons break great hunches of bread, white with flour and plaster. The women are in a hurry and set off running. They have all—either at home or at the hospital—a child to attend to, or an old relative to look after, or else some household work to get done. Stified by the air of the workshops, with swollen eyelids, and hair deadened by the dust of the flock papers, a fine powder that makes one cough, they hasten with a basket on their arm,

through the crowded streets, where the omnibuses move with difficulty in the overflow of traffic.

Near the gate, seated on a stone that served formerly as a mounting-block for horsemen, Risler smilingly regards the sally from the factory. The frank esteem of all these honest folk, whom he knew there when he was insignificant and humble as they, is always a pleasure to him. Their "Good morning, M. Risler," uttered by so many different voices, but always affectionately, warms his heart. The children speak to him without fear, the designers with their long beards—half workmen half artists—exchange a grasp of the hand or a familiar word in passing. Possibly there may be a little too much familiarity in all this, for the good man has not yet fully comprehended the prestige and the authority of his new position, and I know of somebody who finds this carelessness on his part very humiliating. But this somebody can't see him at the present moment and the master profits by her absence to give a hearty slap on the back of Sigismond, the old-bookkeeper who comes out last of all, stiff, ruddy, his neck encased in a large stock, and his head bare—no matter what the weather may be—for fear of a rush of blood to the brain.

Risler and he are fellow-countrymen, and have for each other a profound esteem which dates from their entrance into the factory, from the distant time when they breakfasted together at the little café which Sigismond Planus now enters alone and chooses his dish from a slate hung against the wall.

But look out, here is young M. Fromont's carriage driving up. He has been out all the morning, and the two partners, while walking towards the pretty house they occupy at the end of the garden, talk amicably of their business affairs. "I have been to Prochasson's," says young Fromont, "he has shown me some new patterns, and on my word they are really very good—we must be careful, for we have serious rivals there.

Risler is not uneasy. He feels strong in his experience, and besides—but this in strictest confidence—he is on the track of a wonderful invention, a perfect printing machine, something—in fact, they won't see.

By the side of young Fromont Risler has the appearance of a clerk giving in his accounts to his master. At every step he pauses to speak, for his gestures are heavy, his ideas slow, his words brought out with a certain difficulty. Oh! if he could but

see up above, behind the window of the second story, the little rosy face that observes all this attentively.

Madame Risler is waiting breakfast for her husband and is impatient with her old man's slowness. She beckons with her hand to him to come, but Risler does not see her. He is too much occupied with the little Fromont, the child of George and Clara, who, wrapped all in lace, is taking the air in the arms of her nurse. "How pretty she is! She's the very image of you, Madame Chorche."

"Do you think so, my good Risler? Every one says she is so like her father."

"Yes, a little—but still—"

There they all are, father, mother, Risler, and the nurse, gravely searching for a resemblance in the little sketch of a human being which looks at them with its vague eyes, amazed alike at life and light. At the half-opened window Sidonie leans out to see why her husband does not come. At the same moment Risler takes the baby in his arms, a pretty bundle of white lace and gay coloured ribbons, and tries to make it laugh and crow, with the air and manners of a grandfather. How old he looks, poor man! His great body leaning over the child, his loud voice rendered gruff by his attempts to speak low are both deformities and absurdities. Up above his wife taps the floor with her foot and murmurs between her teeth: "The idiot."

At last tired of waiting she sends the servant to tell her husband that breakfast is ready; but the child's attention is so engrossed that Risler does not know how to get away, how to interrupt this explosion of joy and these little bird-like cries. He succeeds at last in returning the child to the nurse and runs up the stairs laughing with all his heart. He is still laughing when he enters the dining-room, but a look of his wife's stops him short. Sidonie is seated at table, and a resolution to indulge in a display of ill-humour can be read in her victimized attitude.

"So you have come at last, then," she says.

Risler seats himself somewhat abashed, "I could not help it, my pet, that child is so—"

"I have already begged of you not to be so familiar with me, it isn't proper."

"But when we are alone?"

"Ah, you will never learn how to behave in your new position, and what's the consequence? No one respects me here.

Old Achille hardly salutes me when I pass his lodge. It is true I am not a Fromont, and that I have no carriage."

"Come, my pet, you know very well you can use Madame George's carriage. It is always at our service."

"How many times must I repeat that I will be under no obligation to that woman!"

"Oh! Sidonie!"

"Oh yes, we all know it is understood Madame Fromont is God Almighty here, it is forbidden to touch her, and it is my duty to be nothing in this house, to let myself be humiliated, trampled under foot."

"Come, come, my pet—"

Poor Risler tried to interpose, to say one word in favour of his dear Madame George, but this was a blunder. It was the worst form of conciliation he could have chosen, and to crown all, Sidonie continues, "I tell you with all her calm manner that woman is proud and spiteful. She hates me, I know it. When I was the poor little Sidonie to whom she could throw her broken toys and old frocks it was all very well, but now that I am mistress here as well as her, she is vexed and humbled. Madame gives me advice, criticises my actions. 'I was wrong to engage a lady's maid.' Of course! Am I not used to wait on myself? She looks out for opportunities to wound me. When I call on her on Wednesdays, you should hear the tone in which before every one she asks after 'that good Madame Chèbe.' Ah yes! I am a Chèbe and she a Fromont—what of that? My grandfather was a chemist and hers an old peasant enriched by usury. Some day, when she puts on too many airs, I shall tell her so, and that her child is the very image of old Gardinois, and heaven knows he is no beauty."

"Oh!" gasped Risler, who can find nothing to reply.

"Yes, I advise you to make the most of that child of hers. It's always ill, it cries all night like a little squalling cat, I can never sleep for it, and then all day long I have the piano of its mamma with her roulades—tra-la-la—if it were even lively music."

Risler does the wisest thing under the circumstances, he doesn't utter a word, but after a moment when she begins to get calmer he tries to appease her with compliments. "How fine we are to-day? are we going to pay some visits?"

"No, I am not going to pay visits," replies Sidonie with a certain air of pride. "On the contrary, I receive, it is my 'At Home' day!"

And in response to her husband's look of bewilderment, she resumes : " Well, yes, it is my day at home ; Madame Fromont has her day—I am permitted to have one as well, I suppose."

"No doubt, no doubt," replied Risler, looking round him with some little anxiety, "this is the reason then that I see flowers everywhere, in the drawing-room and on the stairs."

"Yes, this morning I sent the servant into the garden. Was it wrong then ? Oh, you don't say so, still I know you think I was wrong—I thought the flowers in the garden were ours as well as theirs."

"Certainly, yes—but—perhaps it would have been better."

"To have asked for them—that's it, humiliate myself still further, for the sake of a few wretched chrysanthemums and two or three green twigs ? Besides I did not hide myself to take them, and when she comes up here presently—"

"What ! she is coming here—oh ! that is kind."

Sidonie starts from her seat indignantly, "What is kind ? I should like to see her not come—kind indeed ! when every Wednesday I go and bore myself in her rooms with a crowd of prim stuck-up hypocrites."

She does not say that Madame Fromont's Wednesdays had been of great use to her, serving as a kind of weekly magazine of fashion, one of those little miscellaneous publications that give the manner of entering and leaving a room, of bowing, of placing flowers in a jardinière, without counting the engravings—the enumeration of all that is worn and the names and addresses of the best modistes. Sidonie does not say that these friends of Clara's of whom she speaks so disdainfully had all been invited to come and see her on her day, and that they had chosen that day themselves.

Would they come ? Would Madame Fromont insult Madame Risler by missing her first Friday ? Sidonie's anxiety makes her quite feverish.

"Come, make haste," says she every other moment, "how long you are breakfasting, good heavens !"

It is one of Risler's weaknesses to eat slowly, and then light his pipe and enjoy his coffee in little sips. To-day he must renounce his favourite habits, must let his pipe remain in its case, on account of the smoke, and after swallowing the last mouthful must go and dress himself very quickly, because his wife requires him this afternoon to greet her friends.

What a stir it creates in the factory when Risler makes his

appearance there in a black coat and a dress tie on a weekday!

"You are going to a wedding, then?" cries the cashier from behind his desk.

And Risler answers, not without pride, "No, it is my wife's day at home."

Soon every one about the place knows it is Sidonie's day at home, even old Achille, who is by no means pleased at the branches being stripped off his winter-laurels at the lodge.

Seated before his drawing-board, under the strong light of the high windows, Risler has thrown off his superfine coat, and turned up his snowy cuffs, but the idea of his wife receiving, preoccupies him and renders him uneasy, and from time to time he puts himself in order and goes up to her.

"No one come yet?" asks he, timidly.

"No, sir, no one."

In her handsome crimson drawing-room—for they have a drawing-room hung with crimson damask, with a *console* between the windows, and a fine table in the middle of a flowery carpet—Sidonie is installed like a lady who receives, with a circle of chairs and couches all round her. Here and there are books and reviews, a little work-basket with silk tassels, a bunch of violets in a crystal globe, and some green plants in the stand. All is arranged exactly as at the Fromonts', one story below, only taste, that invisible line that separates the refined from the vulgar, is wanting. It is like a poor copy of a fine *genre* picture. The mistress of the house herself wears too new a dress, and has more the appearance of a guest than of a lady at home.

In the eyes of Risler, all is superb, irreproachable; he prepares to say so on entering the room, but at the irritated glance of his wife, the poor man pauses intimidated.

"You see it is four o'clock," says she to him, pointing to the time-piece with an angry gesture. "No one will come. But I owe a grudge to Clara especially. She is at home, I am sure, I can hear her."

In fact, since noon Sidonie has been listening to every sound from below, the cries of the baby, the closing of the doors. Risler would like to go down again, fearing the breakfast-table conversation was going to be resumed, but his wife will not permit him. The least thing he can do will be to keep her company, since all the world abandons her, and so he remains

there, stupid, nailed to the place like a man fearing to move during a storm lest he should attract the lightning.

Sidonie fidgets up and down the room, moves a chair, then replaces it, looks at herself in the glass in passing, rings for her maid to go and inquire from Achille if no one had been for her. "That old Achille is so malicious. Perhaps when any one comes, he will say 'I am out.'"

The maid returns, the porter had seen no one yet. Silence and consternation!

Sidonie is standing at the left-hand window and Risler at the right-hand one; they can see into the garden on which the shades of evening are beginning to fall, and the black smoke which the tall chimney spreads over the dull sky. Sigismond's window is the first one to be lighted up on the ground-floor; the cashier trims his lamp himself with scrupulous care, and his tall shadow bent double over his books is seen moving in front of the light. Sidonie's anger is diverted for a moment by these familiar details.

Suddenly a little brougham rolls into the garden and stops at the door. At last here is some one. In a whirlwind of silk, flowers, jet trimmings and furs, briskly mounting the doorstep Sidonie recognises one of the most distinguished visitors to the Fromont receptions, the wife of a rich dealer in bronzes. What glory to receive such a visit! "Quick! Quick!" they take up their positions, the husband leaning against the mantelpiece, the wife in an arm-chair, negligently glancing over a magazine. Fruitless attitudinizing—the fair visitor is not for Sidonie, she has stopped at the story below. Oh, if Madame George could overhear what her neighbour says of her and her friends. At that moment the door is opened and a visitor is announced, "Mademoiselle Planus."

It is the cashier's sister, a poor old maid, humble and gentle, who has made a duty of this visit to the wife of her brother's employer, and appears stupefied at the warmth of her reception. "How very kind of you, pray come near the fire." The good Risler beams with smiles that are in themselves thanks. Sidonie too displays all her graces, happy to show herself in all her glory to one once her equal, and thinking that the other one below stairs will hear that she has visitors. So she makes as much noise as possible in rolling the chairs and pushing back the table; and when the old lady rises to go, amazed, enchanted and confounded, she escorts her to the top of the stairs with a

great rustle of flounces, and says aloud, "I am at home every Friday, you understand every Friday."

By this time it has grown dark. The two great lamps are lighted in the drawing-room; in the adjoining room the maid is laying the table for dinner. It is all over. Madame Fromont will not come.

Sidonie is white with rage.

"Just fancy this baggage who cannot even come up eighteen steps. Madame no doubt considers we are beneath her notice. Oh! but I will be revenged for this."

And in proportion as she vents her anger in unjust words, her voice grows vulgar, taking the tones of the *faubourg* and a low-class accent that betrays the former apprentice of Mademoiselle Le Mire.

Risler is unfortunate enough to put in a word. "Who knows? perhaps the child was ill."

Furiously she turns upon him as if she would like to bite him. "Will you hold your tongue about that child? In the first place, it's all your fault that this occurred—you do not know how to make me respected."

And while the door of her chamber violently pulled to makes the globes of the lamps and the *bric-à-brac* on the side-table tremble, Risler, remaining alone motionless in the middle of the drawing-room, regards with an air of consternation his white cuffs and large feet shod in patent leathers, and murmurs mechanically:

"My wife's day at home!"

CHAPTER II.

TRUE PEARL AND FALSE.

"WHAT can be the matter? what have I done to her?" Clara often asked of herself, thinking of Sidonie. She was ignorant of all that had passed between her friend and George at Savigny.

With her upright life and tranquil spirit it was impossible for her to divine what jealous and base ambition had grown up at her side during fifteen years. Still the enigmatic look that smiled coldly at her from the pretty face troubled her without her taking particular account of it. To an affected politeness, unusual in friends from childhood, succeeded an ill-disguised anger, a dry and cutting intonation before which Clara stood puzzled as before a problem.

Sometimes also a singular presentiment, the vague intuition of a great misfortune was joined to this uneasiness, for women are all in some degree clairvoyant; and even with the most candid, the most profound ignorance of evil is lighted by sudden visions of an astonishing clearness.

From time to time, after a rather long talk, one of those unforeseen meetings in which the countenance, taken unawares, allows the true thought to be plainly seen, Madame Fromont reflected seriously on this singular little Sidonie; but life was there, active and urgent, with its surroundings, its affections and pre-occupations, leaving her no leisure to linger over these trifles. In fact, there comes a time for women in which existence keeps taking such sudden turns that all horizons change, all prospects are transformed.

Had she still been a young girl, this friendship which she was losing shred by shred, stripped away as it were by some evil hand, would have greatly saddened her. But she had lost her father, the greatest, in fact, the only affection of her youth, and then she had married, and a child had come to her with its adorable and continual needs. Moreover, she had

with her mother, now almost in her second childhood, and still stupefied by the tragical death of her husband. In a life so taken up the caprices of Sidonie had little place; and Clara Fromont had hardly thought of being astonished at her marriage with Risler. Evidently he was too old; but after all, since they loved one another—

As to feeling vexed that little Sidonie had arrived at her present high position, had become almost her own equal, her superior nature was incapable of such littleness. On the contrary, she would have liked with all her heart to see this young woman, who lived near—lived her life, so to speak, and who had been her companion in childhood, happy and respected. Very affectionately she tried to instruct her, to initiate her into the ways of the world as one would a well-gifted country-girl, who needs but little to render her charming. Between two young and pretty women such counsels are not easily accepted. When Madame Fromont on the day of a grand dinner took Madame Risler into her chamber and said to her, smilingly, in order not to give her offence, "Too many jewels, dear; and you know with high dresses one does not wear flowers in the hair," Sidonie reddened and thanked her friend, but at the bottom of her heart scored another grudge against her.

Among Clara's acquaintances, she had been but coldly welcomed. The Faubourg-St.-Germain has its pretensions, but do you not think that the Marais has its own also? These wives and daughters of rich manufacturers knew the history of little Sidonie, and would have guessed it simply from her manner of presenting and bearing herself among them.

Sidonie's toil was all in vain. The leaven of the shop-girl remained in her still. Her amiability, slightly forced and at times too humble, jarred like the false tone of the shops; and her scornful attitudes recalled to mind the superb mien of those "*premières*," decked out by the show-rooms, in robes of black silk which they have to restore to the wardrobe before leaving in the evening, and who regard with an imposing air, from the height of their high-curled heads, the petty souled people that venture to bargain.

She felt she was being examined and criticised, and her timidity was forced to arm as for war. The names uttered in her presence, the pleasures, the fêtes, the books spoken of, were unknown to her. Clara placed her *au courant*, and supported her as well as she could with a friendly hand. But among these

ladies many thought Sidonie pretty, which alone was sufficient for disliking that she should enter their set. Others, proud of their husband's position, of their wealth, never could find sufficient insolent silence, or condescending politeness to humiliate the little upstart. Sidonie confounded them all in a single phrase, "Clara's friends; that is to say, my enemies!" But she bore a serious grudge against one of them alone.

The two partners suspected nothing of what was going on between their wives. Risler, always absorbed in his invention of a printing-machine, sometimes remained seated at his drawing-table until midnight. George Fromont passed his days abroad, breakfasted at his club, and was rarely at the factory. He had his reasons for this.

The vicinity of Sidonie troubled him, and the passionate fancy he had had for her, that love sacrifice in obedience to the last wishes of his uncle, often came back to his memory with all the regret that belongs to the irreparable. He felt himself weak and he ran away. His was a soft, irresolute nature sufficiently intelligent to know itself, but too fickle to guide itself aright.

The evening of Risler's wedding, although married himself only a few months, he felt, when beside Sidonie, a return of all the emotion of that stormy night at Savigny. Thenceforward without taking any particular account he avoided seeing her or speaking of her. Unfortunately as they inhabited the same house the wives visited each other ten times a day, so chance frequently brought George and Sidonie together. And thus came to pass this singular thing, the husband, anxious to remain faithful, deserted his house and sought distractions outside.

Clara witnessed this without astonishment. She had been accustomed by her father to the perpetual abstraction of a business life, and during these absences, full of zeal in her new duties as wife and mother, invented long tasks and work of all sorts. There were also walks for the child, varied by calm rests in the sun, from which she returned delighted with the progress of the little girl, penetrated with the joy and laughter of the little ones in the open air, and with some of their happiness beaming in the depths of her serious eyes.

Sidonie was also much out of doors. Often towards night-fall George's carriage passing beneath the gateway forced Madame Risler to stand aside quickly, as she was entering in a superb toilette after some great excursion in Paris. The

boulevard shop-windows, purchases long pondered over, to relish as it were the new pleasure of buying, often kept her very late from home. They exchanged bows, a cold glance at the turn of the staircase; and George entered his home very quickly as a place of refuge, hiding under a tide of caresses showered upon the held-out child the trouble he had suddenly felt.

Sidonie appeared to have remembered nothing and to have retained only contempt for this soft, weak nature. Besides she had many other preoccupations. In their crimson* drawing-room between the two windows her husband had placed a piano. After much hesitation she had decided to learn singing, thinking it was a little late to begin the piano; so twice a week Madame Dobson, a pretty sentimental blonde came to give her lessons from twelve to one o'clock. In the silence of the great courts all around these *a—a—a—* and *o—o—o—*, prolonged with persistence and began over again half a score of times with the window wide open, gave to the factory something of the aspect of a young ladies' boarding-school.

It was in reality a scholar who was practising there, a little, restless, inexperienced soul full of unacknowledged desires, having everything to learn in order to become a true woman. Unfortunately her ambition was confined to the mere surface of things. "Clara Fromont," she thought to herself, "plays the piano, I will sing. She passes for an elegant and distinguished woman, and I should like as much to be said of me." Yet without thinking for a moment of instructing herself she passed her life in running from shop to shop troubled about "what will be worn this winter?" In fact she aimed at sumptuous show, at all those things that strike the eyes of passers-by.

Something of those false pearls she had so long handled remained sticking to the tips of her fingers, a little of their artificial nacre, of their hollow fragility, of their shallow lustre. She was indeed herself a false pearl, round, brilliant, and smooth enough to deceive the vulgar; but Clara Fromont was a veritable pearl with a lustre at once rich and moderate, and when the two were seen together the difference was perceptible. One recognized that Clara had been a pearl always, a pearl from childhood, built up from elements of elegance and distinction which had imparted to her a rare and precious nature. The other, on the contrary, was plainly enough the work of Paris, that maker of false jewels, who arranges a thousand charming

trifles, brilliant but flimsy, ill-matched, ill-adjusted, a true product of the petty commerce with which Sidonie was familiar.

What Sidonie envied Clara above all was her child, the petted darling, be-ribboned from the curtains of its cradle to the bonnet of its nurse. She did not think of those sweet duties full of patience and self-denial, of the long coaxings to sleep, of the merry wakings like the sparkling of fresh water. No! in the child she saw nothing but the opportunity for promenades. The array of flowing sashes and long feathers that accompanies the young mother in the whirl of the streets was so pretty!

She had only her parents or her husband to accompany her abroad, and she preferred to go out alone. The good Risler had such an absurd way of being loving, playing with his wife as if she were a doll, pinching her chin and her cheeks, dancing round her with cries: "Whew! whew!" or regarding her with his big tender eyes like an affectionate and grateful dog. This booby love that made of her a plaything, a mantel-shelf ornament, made her ashamed.

As to her parents, they embarrassed her in the world she was anxious to see, and shortly after her marriage she had almost relieved herself of them by establishing them in a cottage at Montrouge. That had cut short the frequent invasions of M. Chèbe in his long frock-coat, and the interminable visits of worthy Madame Chèbe, who, on the return of good fortune, had recovered her former habits of gossiping and lazy mode of life. Sidonie would have been glad, at the same time, to have removed the Delobelles, whose proximity worried her. But the Marais was a centre for the comedian on account of the neighbouring boulevard theatres, and Désirée, like all sedentary people, was attached to the familiar horizon; the dull court, dark in the winter at four o'clock, seemed a friend to her, a well-known face that the sun brightened sometimes, as with a smile on her account. Sidonie, unable to get rid of the Delobelles, made up her mind not to see them. Altogether, her life would have been solitary and dull enough but for certain amusements that Clara Fromont obtained her. Yet these were each time a fresh source of anger. She thought: "Everything comes to me through her!"

So that when at dinner time, they sent her from the story below, the pass for a box at the theatre, or an invitation for the evening, even while dressing, delighted at the opportunity of showing herself, she thought of nothing but of crushing her

rival. *These occasions were, however, becoming rare, Clara being more and more occupied with her child.* Still when old Gardinois made a journey to Paris, he never failed to reunite the two households. The gaiety of the old peasant, in order to flourish, had need of little Sidonie whom his jests did not offend. He would take them, all four, to dinner at Philippe's—his favourite restaurant, where he knew the master, the waiters, the cellarman—and spend a lot of money, and thence would conduct them to a box, engaged beforehand, at the Opera-Comique, or the Palais-Royal. At the theatre he laughed aloud, talked as familiarly to the box-openers as he did to the waiters at Philippe's, called out for the stools for the ladies' feet, and on going out, wished to have the cloaks and coats before any one else, as though he were the only upstart millionaire in the house.

At these somewhat vulgar outings, which her husband generally eschewed, Clara, with her usual tact, dressed soberly, and passed unseen. Sidonie, on the contrary, all her canvas spread, displayed herself in the front of the box and laughed heartily at the grandfather's stories, happy to have come down from the third or second circle, her places of former days, to these fine stage-boxes ornamented with glass, whose velvet border seemed made on purpose to show off her light gloves, her ivory opera-glass, and her spangled fan. The trivialities of these public places, the red and gold of the hangings, were true luxury to her. She bloomed amidst it all like a pretty paper flower in a filigree vase.

One night at a successful piece at the Palais-Royal, amid the ladies present—painted celebrities, with tiny bonnets and immense fans, whose made-up heads emerged from the shadow of the boxes, like vaguely animated portraits—the behaviour of Sidonie, her toilette, her way of laughing and looking, were much remarked. All the opera-glasses in the house, guided by some magnetic current, were gradually directed towards the box she occupied; Clara was at last embarrassed and discreetly gave up her place to her husband who, unfortunately, had accompanied them that evening. George, young and elegant, by Sidonie's side, had the appearance of her natural companion, while behind them Risler, always so calm, so self-effaced, seemed in his right place by the side of Clara Fromont, who preserved in her slightly sombre vestments, as it were, the incognito of a virtuous woman at an Opera ball.

On going out, each partner gave his arm to his neighbour. An attendant, speaking of George, said to Sidonie, "Your husband!" and the little woman beamed with pleasure.

"Your husband!" This simple phrase had sufficed to upset her, to stir up a heap of evil things at the bottom of her heart. As they passed through the corridor, she looked at Risler and Madame Fromont walking before them; the elegance of Clara seemed to her spoiled, vulgarised by the clumsy gait of Risler. She said to herself: "How awkward he must make me look when we are walking together!" And her heart beat quickly at the idea of the charming, happy, admired couple she and George Fromont, whose arm trembled against her own, would have made.

So when the blue carriage came to the door of the theatre, to take the Fromonts home, she felt that, after all, this woman had stolen her place, and that she would be justified in trying to win it back again.

CHAPTER III.

THE BRASSERIE IN THE RUE BLONDEL.

Since his marriage, Risler had given up frequenting the brasserie. Sidonie would have been glad to see him leave the house in the evening, bound for an elegant club, a meeting-place of rich and well-dressed men; but the idea of his returning to join his friends of former days, Delobelle, Sigismund, and her father, amid the smoke of pipes, humiliated her, and made her unhappy. So he gave over going there, and that cost him something.

This brasserie, situate in an out-of-the-way corner of old Paris, was a sort of souvenir of his own land. The rarity of vehicles, the ground floors with tall windows protected by iron gratings, the odours of drugs and pharmaceutical products, gave to the little Rue Blondel a vague resemblance to certain streets of Bâle or Zurich.

The brasserie was kept by a Swiss, and largely patronized by his fellow countrymen. When the door opened, through the

smoke of the pipes, you had a view of a large room with hams hanging from the beams, barrels of beer in rows, sawdust on the floor up to one's ankles, and on the counter great bowls of red-skinned potatoes, and baskets of *prachtels* fresh from the oven, powdered with white salt on their golden knobs.

For twenty years Risler had smoked his pipe there, a long pipe marked with his name on the frequenter's rack, and had had his special table, where some of his countrymen came and sat, silent and discreet, listening to and admiring, without comprehending the interminable discussions of Chêbe and Delobelle. Risler, having abandoned the brasserie, the other two had, in their turn, deserted the place for several good reasons.

One was that M. Chêbe now lived too far off. Thanks to the generosity of his children, the dream of his life was realised. "When I am rich," the little man had always said, in his wretched dwelling in the Marais, "I will have a house of my own at the gates of Paris, almost in the country, with a little garden that I shall dig and water myself. It will suit my health much better than the agitated life of the capital." Ah, well! now he had such a house, but I assure you he did not find much amusement there.

It was at Montrouge on the rampart road. "A little cottage with a garden," said the bill, the dimensions of which gave almost an exact idea of the size of the property. The paper-hangings were new and rural in character, the paint was fresh; a barrel sunk in the ground beside a bower of Virginian creeper, played the part of a piece of water. Add to these various advantages that a hedge only separated this paradise from another "cottage with a garden" of exactly the same character, where the cashier, Sigismond Planus, lived with his sister. Their neighbourhood was dear to Madame Chêbe. When the good woman felt lonely, she would take her knitting or mending into the arbour of the old maid, whom she dazzled with the recital of her past splendours. Unfortunately, her husband had not the same amusement.

All went well at first. It was in the middle of summer that M. Chêbe, in his shirt sleeves, arranged the details of their installation; and every nail he drove into the walls was the subject of frivolous reflections and endless discussions. The same thing occurred with the garden: He had, first of all, decided to have an English garden with lawns always green,

and winding paths shaded with shrubs. But then shrubberies take such a long time to form.

"Faith! I have a great mind to make a kitchen garden of it," cried the impatient little man. And now behold him dreaming of nothing but beds of vegetables, kidney-beans in rows, and peach-trees trained espalier-wise. He dug throughout the morning, knitting his brows and wiping his forehead ostentatiously before his wife, in order that she might say, "But rest a little; you will kill yourself."

After all, the garden remained a medley of flowers and fruit, of lawn and kitchen-garden. Every time M. Chèbe went to Paris he took care to ornament his button-hole with a rose from his flower-bed. As long as the fine weather lasted, these good people never tired of admiring the sunset behind the fortifications, the length of the days, and the pure country air. Sometimes, in the evening, they sang together with the windows open, and in presence of the stars which commenced shining at the same time that the lamps of the neighbouring railway were lighted up, Ferdinand Chèbe became lyrical. But when the rainy weather came, and they were forced to remain within doors, how dull it was! Madame Chèbe, a thorough Parisienne, regretted the narrow streets of the Marais, her walks to the Blancs-Manteaux market, or to the shopkeepers of the neighbourhood.

From her post of observation and of work near the window, she looked out with an air of weariness on the damp little garden when the convolvulus run to seed, and the nasturtiums that had shed their flowers, were loosening themselves from the palisades,—on the long straight line of the rampart slopes always green, and on the more distant street corner, and the station for the Paris omnibuses with all the points of their route temptingly inscribed on the varnished boards. Every time one of these vehicles started on its journey, she followed it with her eyes—as a convict at Cayenne or Noumea contemplates the mail-boat returning to France—made the journey with it, knew where it would stop and where it would heavily turn, almost grazing the shop-fronts with its wheels.

Shut up in the house, M. Chèbe became terrible. He could no longer occupy himself in the garden. The fortifications were deserted on Sundays, so that he could stroll no more among families of work people lunching on the grass, going as a neighbour from one group to another, with his feet in embroidered

slippers, and all the authority of a rich proprietor of the vicinity. This he missed above everything, burning as he was with the desire of being noticed. From not knowing what to do, from having no one to pose before, no one to listen to his projects and his stories, to his account of the accident to the Duc d'Orléans—"the same thing, you know, had happened to him in his youth"—the unfortunate Ferdinand overwhelmed his wife with reproaches.

"Your daughter," exclaimed he, "has driven us into exile, your daughter is ashamed of us." One heard nothing but "your daughter—your daughter—your daughter." For in his anger against Sidonie he renounced her, leaving to his wife the responsibility of this unnatural child. It was a positive comfort to poor Madame Chèbe when her husband mounted the omnibus to go and look up Delobelle, who was always ready for a lounge, to pour into his bosom the many complaints he had against his daughter and her husband.

The illustrious Delobelle also had a grudge against Risler and said unhesitatingly of him: "He cuts his old friends." The great man had hoped to fill an important part in the new household, to be the organizer of its fêtes, the master of the revels. Instead of this Sidonie received him coldly, and Risler no longer took him to the brasserie. Still the actor did not complain too loudly, and every time he met his friend he overwhelmed him with civilities and flatteries, for he knew he would soon have need of him.

Weary of waiting for an intelligent manager, and failing to obtain the part he had longed for during so many years, Delobelle entertained the idea of buying a theatre and carrying it on himself. He reckoned on Risler to provide the necessary funds. At this moment there happened to be a little theatre on the Boulevard du Temple for sale in consequence of the bankruptcy of its lessee. Delobelle spoke of the affair to Risler, at first in a vaguely hypothetical manner, saying, "There is a good stroke of business to be done."

Risler listened with his habitual gravity and observed: "Yes it would be the very thing for you." Then at a more direct hint, not daring to say "no" he took refuge behind, "I shall see, later on, I can't say," and finally pronounced the unfortunate words: "It would be necessary to see the estimates."

The actor laboured for eight days, made plans, and cast up figures while seated between his two women-folk, who watched

him admiringly and were intoxicated with this new dream. The neighbours said, "*M. Delobelle is going to buy a theatre.*" On the boulevard, in the actors' cafés the talk all turned on this acquisition. Delobelle did not conceal that he had found a capitalist, and this led to his being followed about by a crowd of actors wanting employment, old comrades who tapped him on the shoulder, reminding him, "You know, dear boy!" He lunched at the café, promised engagements, wrote his letters there, saluted with the tips of his fingers the people whom he knew as they entered, and held animated conversations in quiet corners. Already two threadbare authors had read to him a drama in seven tableaux which "suited him like a glove," for his opening piece. He constantly spoke of "*my theatre,*" and his letters were addressed to "*M. Delobelle, Manager.*"

When he had composed his prospectus and made his estimates he sought out Risler at the factory. The latter being very busy, appointed to meet him in the Rue Blondel, and the same evening Delobelle, arriving first at the brasserie, installed himself at their old table, asked for a canette of beer and two glasses and waited. He waited a long time with his eye on the door, fuming with impatience; Risler did not come. Each time any one entered, the actor turned round. He had placed his papers on the table and re-read them with appropriate gestures and movements of the head and lips.

The affair was unique, splendid. Already he saw himself acting, for that was the essential point,—acting in a theatre of his own, parts written expressly for him in which he would produce all the effect.

All at once the door opened, and in the mist of the smoke from the pipes M. Chébe appeared. He was as surprised and vexed to see Delobelle there as Delobelle was himself. He had written that morning to his son-in-law to say that he wished to speak with him very seriously, and that he would meet him at the brasserie. It was an affair of honour between themselves as man and man.

The real truth of this so-called affair of honour was that M. Chébe had given notice to quit the little house at Montrouge and had taken in the Rue du Mail, in the very heart of the business quarter, a shop, together with the floor above. A shop? Yes, and now he was a little anxious about what he had done, fearing that his daughter might object to it, especially as

the shop would cost much more than the house at Montrouge, and there were some heavy repairs to do on taking possession. As he had long known his son-in-law's good-heartedness Chèbe wished to speak to him first, hoping to get him on his side and to leave him the responsibility of this domestic revolution. But instead of Risler, here was Delobelle.

They looked at each other with an evil eye like two dogs meeting over the same bone. Each comprehended what the other was after, and they did not seek to impose on each other.

"Is not my son-in-law here?" asked Chèbe, eyeing the papers spread on the table, and laying stress on the words my "son-in-law," so as to properly indicate that Risler belonged to him and not to the other.

"I am waiting for him," replied Delobelle, arranging his papers. With pursed-up lips and a mysterious and dignified air he added in a theatrical tone: "About something very important."

"And I also," said Chèbe, whose three hairs rose on end like the quills of a porcupine. At the same time he seated himself beside Delobelle, asking like him for a canette and two glasses; then, with his hands in his pockets and his back against the wall, he waited. The pair of empty glasses, one beside the other, destined for the same absent one, had an air of defiance. And still Risler did not come.

The two silent drinkers grew impatient, fidgeted on their seats, each hoping that the other would leave. At length their ill-humour found vent, and naturally it was poor Risler that received it all.

"How unbecoming to make a man of my age wait so long," began M. Chèbe, who never invoked his great age but in circumstances like this.

Then Delobelle replied: "I believe in fact he is making fun of us."

The other continued: "Doubtless Monsieur has people to dinner!"

"And what people!" sneered the illustrious Delobelle, in whom smarting memories awoke.

"The fact is—" continued M. Chèbe.

Then they drew nearer to each other and gossiped. Both had grievances at heart against Risler and Sidonie. Risler, for all his good-natured air, was at the bottom nothing but an

egotist, an upstart. They ridiculed his accent and appearance, and imitated some of his peculiar ways.

M. Chèbe went rather far: "Let him take care," said he, "he has had the foolishness to allow the father and mother to be separated from their child; if anything happens to him he will have nothing to reproach us with. A girl who no longer has the example of her parents before her eyes—you understand?"

"Certainly, certainly," said Delobelle, "especially as Sidonie has become very coquettish, but what can you expect? He will only get what he deserves. Do you think a man of his age ought to—? Hush! here he is."

Risler had come in, and was moving towards them shaking hands as he did so with old acquaintances all along the benches.

Between the three friends there was a moment of embarrassment. Risler excused himself as best he could. He had been detained. Sidonie had had company—here Delobelle pressed M. Chèbe's foot beneath the table—and all the time he was speaking the poor man, perplexed by the two empty glasses that awaited him, did not know before which he ought to seat himself.

Delobelle proved generous: "You have business, gentlemen," said he, "don't let me be in your way." Afterwards he murmured, with a significant glance, to Risler: "I have the papers."

"The papers?" replied the latter, bewildered.

"The estimates," whispered the actor. Then with a great affectation of discretion he moved further off and resumed the reading of his documents, his head in his hands and his fingers in his ears.

The others talked at first in low tones, then more loudly, for M. Chèbe could not moderate his sharp shrill voice for long. "He had not reached the age to be buried, the deuce no! He would have died of ennui at Montrouge. The Rue du Mail, the Rue du Sentier, the activity of the commercial quarter, that was what he needed."

"Yes, but a shop, why, take a shop?" objected Risler, timidly.

"Why take a shop? Why take a shop?" repeated Chèbe red as an Easter egg, and raising his voice to the highest note in his register, "because I am a trader, M. Risler, a trader,

like my father before me. Oh ! I know what you would say. I have no trade—but whose fault is that?—Ah ! if the persons who buried me alive at Montrouge, at the gates of Bicêtre, had only had the good sense to furnish me with funds for an opening !”

Here Risler succeeded in imposing silence, and only scraps of the subsequent conversation could be heard. “Most convenient shop—lofty, can breathe there at ease—could not wish for a better—projects for the future—gigantic affair—speak when the time comes—many people will be astonished !” While catching these fragmentary phrases Delobelle, apparently more and more absorbed in his estimates, tried to assume the air of a man who is not listening.

Risler, embarrassed, sipped his beer from time to time to keep himself in countenance. At last, when M. Chèbe became calm, and with good reason, his son-in-law turned smilingly towards Delobelle, only however to encounter a severe impassive look, which seemed to say “Well ! and me ?”

“Good gracious ! yes 'tis true,” thought the poor man. Changing his chair and glass he went and sat in front of the actor, but M. Chèbe had not the politeness of Delobelle. Instead of discreetly withdrawing, he pushed forward his glass and joined in to such an extent that the great man, who did not care to speak before him, returned his papers to his pocket for the second time, solemnly saying to Risler : “We will see later on.”

Much later on in fact, for M. Chèbe had made this reflection to himself : “My son-in-law is so stupidly generous that if I leave him with this spunger who knows what he may not get out of him.” So he remained to watch.

The actor was furious. Put the thing off to another day ? Impossible. Risler had just told them that he was going away the next day to Savigny for a month.

“A month at Savigny,” cried M. Chèbe, exasperated at the idea of his son-in-law escaping him. “And business ?”

“Oh, I shall come to Paris every day with George. It is M. Gardinois who wishes to see his little Sidonie again.”

M. Chèbe shook his head. He thought this step very imprudent. Business was business. One ought to be there, always there, on the spot. Who knows?—the factory might take fire in the night. And he repeated with a sententious air : “The master's eye, my boy ! the master's eye !” While beside him the actor, whom this projected departure did

not suit any more than himself, rounded his large eye and gave it an expression at the same time subtle and commanding, the true expression of "the master's eye."

At length, towards midnight, the last omnibus for Montrouge bore off the tyrannical father-in-law, and Delobelle was free to speak.

"First the prospectus," said he, unwilling to open all at once the question of figures, and with his eye-glasses on, emphatic, always stagey, he began: "When one calmly considers the state of decrepitude into which dramatic art has fallen in France, when one measures the distance that separates the theatre of Molière—" There were several pages in this style; Risler listened, pulling at his pipe, not daring to stir, for the reader every instant regarded him over his eye-glasses to judge of the effect of his phrases. Unhappily, just in the middle of the prospectus, the café closed. The lights were put out and they were obliged to leave. And the estimates? It was arranged they should read them while walking home. They stopped beneath every gas lamp. The actor trolled out his figures: so much for the house, so much for gas, so much for rates and taxes, so much for the actors.

On this latter point Delobelle dwelt with emphasis. "The best of the affair," said he, "is that we shall not have to pay a leading man. Our first lead will be Bibi" (when Delobelle spoke of himself he usually said Bibi). "A first lead draws, say, twenty thousand francs salary. Not having to pay that, it is as if you put twenty thousand francs in your pocket, isn't it?"

Risler did not answer. He had the constrained air, the wandering eyes of a man whose thoughts are elsewhere. The estimates having been read, Delobelle, who saw with terror that they were approaching the corner of the Rue des Vieilles Haudriettes, put the question plainly: Would he go into the affair, yes or no?

"Well, no," said Risler, inspired by an heroic courage derived from the proximity of the factory, and from the thought that the happiness of his household was at stake.

Delobelle was stupefied, he had believed the affair settled, and greatly moved, his papers in his hand, he regarded the other with staring eyes.

"No," repeated Risler, "I cannot do what you ask, and this is why."

Slowly, with his accustomed heaviness, the good fellow explained that he was not rich. Although partner in an important firm he had no money at his disposal. George and he drew a certain sum every month, and when the balance sheet was made out at the end of the year they shared the profits. Furnishing his apartments had cost a large sum, had indeed swallowed up his savings, and it wanted four months more to the annual stock-taking. Where could he get the 30,000 francs that it was necessary to pay down on the nail for the acquisition of the theatre? And, moreover, after all the affair might not succeed.

"That is impossible—Bibi will be there!" so saying poor Bibi drew himself up; but Risler had quite made up his mind; and all the reasonings of Bibi were met with evasive replies. "Later on, perhaps—I won't say but that in two or three years—"

The comedian struggled hard for a long time, disputing the ground foot by foot. He proposed to go over the estimates again. The thing might be done at a cheaper rate.

"It will still be too expensive for me," interrupted Risler. "My name, too, does not belong to me alone. It forms part of the firm, and I have no right to risk it. Fancy me becoming bankrupt!" His voice trembled when pronouncing the word bankrupt.

"But as everything will be in my name," pleaded Delobelle, who had no such ridiculous scruples. He tried in every way, invoked the sacred interests of art, went even so far as to speak of little actresses whose provoking glances, etc.

Risler gave a great laugh. "Come, come, you joker; what's that you say? You forget we are both married, and also that it is very late, and that our wives will be expecting us. No ill-feeling is there? It is not a refusal, you understand. Stay, come and see me after the stock-taking. We will talk it over then. Ah! there's old Achille putting out the gas. I must go in. Good-night."

It was past one in the morning when the actor reached his home. The two women awaited him, working as usual, but with unwonted nervousness. Every instant the large scissors in Madame Delobelle's hand were seized with singular tremblings, and Désirée's little fingers, engaged in mounting some exotic specimen, made one giddy to look at them, they went so nimbly. The long feathers of the humming birds, spread on

the table before her, seemed to possess a richer colour, a greater brilliancy than they did on other days. A beautiful visitor had come that evening, whose name was Hope. She had made the great effort of mounting to the fifth floor of that dark staircase, and opening the door of the little lodging to throw into it a luminous glance. Whatever deceptions one may have had during life these magic gleams always dazzle one.

"Oh, if father is successful!" said Madame Delobelle from time to time, as though summing up a world of happy thoughts into which her reverie had led her.

"He will succeed, rest assured, mamma. M. Risler is so good, I will answer for him. Sidonie loves us too, although, since her marriage, she has seemed to neglect her old friends a little; but we must recollect the change in her position. Besides, I shall never forget what she has done for me."

And at the remembrance of what Sidonie had done for her the little cripple attacked her work still more feverishly. Her electrified fingers moved with redoubled quickness; one would have thought they were running after something fugitive and not to be secured; such, for instance, as happiness or the love of some one who does not care for you.

"And what has she done for you?" the mother might have asked, but what her daughter said interested her but little at that moment. She was thinking only of her great man.

"Only think, little one—if your father gets a theatre and begins to play again as he used to do. You can't remember it, you were too young, but he had an immense success, calls before the curtain. One night at Alençon the subscribers to the theatre presented him with a gold wreath. Oh! he was brilliant in those days, so gay, so happy in life. People who see him now don't know him, poor man, misfortune has so changed him. Ah! well. I am sure nothing but a little success is wanted to make him young and contented again. And besides, there is money to be made as a lessee. At Nantes the lessee kept his carriage. Can you fancy us with a carriage? No, but can you now? But it would be nice for you. You would be able to go out, to leave your couch a little. Father would take us into the country and you would see the water and the trees, you who long so much to see them."

"Oh! the trees," said the pale little recluse, in a low trembling voice.

At this moment the front door of the house was violently

closed, and the measured tread of M. Delobelle resounded in the hall. A moment of anguish elapsed without a word or breathing. The two women did not even dare look at one another, and the mother's large scissors trembled so much that they cut the wire the wrong way.

Certainly the poor devil had just received a terrible blow. His shattered illusions, the humiliation of a refusal, the jests of his comrades, the bill at the café, where he had breakfasted on credit during all the time of his managership, which he would now have to pay; all these things floated before him in the silence and the darkness of the five flights of stairs he had to mount. His heart was sore, but the actor's nature was so strong in him, that even in this genuine sorrow he thought it his duty to put on a conventionally tragic mask.

As soon as he entered the room, he stopped short, cast a fatal glance over the apartment, the table covered with work, his frugal supper waiting for him in a corner, and the two dear anxious faces raising towards him their glistening eyes. The actor remained a full minute without speaking—you know how long a minute's silence is in a theatre—then he took three steps forward, fell into a low chair beside the table, and said in a hissing voice, "I am ruined."

And at the same time he brought his hand down so heavily on the table, that the birds and insects thereon flew to the four corners of the room. His frightened wife rose and approached him timidly, while Désirée half raised herself from her seat with an expression of nervous anguish that contracted all her features.

Sunk in his chair, utterly vanquished, his arms hanging down, his head drooping on his breast, the comedian spoke in a broken monologue, interrupted and varied with dramatic sighs and gasps, and filled with imprecations against the "ferocious, egotistic trading classes, those monsters to whom the artist gives his flesh and blood for food."

Then he reviewed all his theatrical career, the triumphs of his first appearance, the golden wreath of the subscribers of Alençon, his marriage with that "sainted woman," and he pointed to the poor creature who remained standing near him all tears, with trembling lips, feebly shaking her head at every word her husband uttered.

Really, any one who had not previously known the illustrious Delobelle would have been able after listening to this

long monologue to relate his life in detail. He called to mind his arrival in Paris, his disappointments, his privations. Alas ! it was not he who had suffered the privations, you had only to see his full-blown countenance beside the worn and emaciated faces of the two women. But the actor did not look so closely at things. Continuing to intoxicate himself with declamatory words ; " Oh ! " exclaimed he " to have struggled so hard—Ten years—fifteen years, have I struggled, sustained by these devoted creatures, nourished by them."

" O ! papa, papa, stop ! " cried Désirée with clasped hands.

" Yes, yes, nourished by them, and I do not blush to own it. It was in the cause of art, the sacred cause of art, that I accepted all their devotion. But now it is more than I can stand. Things have gone too far. I give up."

" Oh ! my dear, what is that you say ? " cried the mother, springing towards him.

" No, leave me, I am at the end of my strength. They have killed the artist in me. It is over. I give up the stage."

Then if you had seen the two women throw their arms round him, entreating him to struggle still, proving to him he had no right to give up, you would have been moved to tears. Delobelle was firm. At last, however, he yielded and promised to hold on for a time, since they wished it ; but it had needed supplications and caresses to bring that about.

A quarter of an hour later, the great man, relieved by his monologue, solaced by the expression he had given to his despair, was seated at the end of the table, and supping with a good appetite, having retained nothing of what he had gone through beyond a slight lassitude similar to that experienced by an actor who has played during the evening a long and highly dramatic part.

In such a case, the actor who has moved a whole house and has wept real tears on the stage, once away no longer thinks of it. He leaves his emotion in his dressing room with his costume and his wigs ; while the spectators, more artless, more strongly impressed, reach home with swollen eyes, and the over-excitement of their nerves keep them awake for a long time.

Little Désirée and her mother did not sleep much that night !

CHAPTER IV.

AT SAVIGNY.

It was a great misfortune this sojourn of the two families at Savigny for a month. After two years George and Sidonie found themselves again side by side on that old estate,—too old not to be always like itself—where the stones, the pools, the trees, all unchangeable, seemed to deride the things that change and pass away. It would have needed two characters differently formed, more able to resist temptation, to avert the fatality of this meeting. As for Clara, she had never been so happy, never had Savigny appeared so beautiful to her. What joy to walk with her child on the lawns where she herself had walked when quite little, to seat herself, a young mother, on the shady banks, from which her own mother had watched her playing, to go about leaning on George's arm and recognise the different corners where they had played together. She felt a tranquil satisfaction, the full happiness of a calm life that enjoys in silence, and all the day her long robe swept the grass, retarded by the little steps of her child, by its cries and its exactions.

Sidonie did not often join in these maternal walks. She said the noise of children wearied her, and on this point she found herself in accord with old Gardinois to whom everything was a pretext for vexing his granddaughter. He thought to do so by paying attention only to Sidonie, making more fêtes on her account than at her former visit. The carriages, hidden away for two years past in the coach-house, and dusted once a week because the spiders spread their webs on the silk cushions, were placed at her disposal, the horses were put to three times a day, and the gates turned on their hinges continually. Everything in the house followed this fashionable impulse. The gardener took greater care of his flowers, because Madame Risler chose the most beautiful to wear in her hair at dinner-time; then visitors called. Picnic parties too were arranged at which Madame Fromont presided, but at which Sidonie with her lively behaviour shone unrivalled.

Often Clara left her in full possession. The child had her fixed hours of sleeping and walking, which no pleasure was ever allowed to interfere with. The mother drew herself away perforce and often in the evening she was unable to go with Sidonie to meet the two partners on their return from Paris. "You will excuse me," said she, going up to her room.

Madame Risler triumphed ! Elegant, idle, she set out at the full speed of the horses, unconscious of the rapid pace. Only the keen wind blowing under her veil enlivened her. An inn at the turn of the road, or a group of ill-clad children on foot in the grass near the way-side, seen through her half-closed eyelids, vaguely recalled to mind her old Sunday promenades in company with Risler and her parents, and the little shiver that ran through her at the remembrance, only caused her to settle herself still better in her fresh, elegantly arranged toilette, till, lulled by the gentle rocking of the carriage, her thoughts slumbered again reassured and happy.

At the station where other carriages were waiting, she was much stared at. Two or three times she heard the whisper, "It is young Madame Fromont," and in fact any one might have been deceived on seeing the three on their way from the station. Sidonie occupied the back seat beside George, laughing and talking to him ; Risler sat opposite to them smiling peacefully, slightly embarrassed by the fine equipage and with his great hands spread out flat on his knees. This idea of being taken for Madame Fromont made her very proud and every day she got more used to it.

On arriving at the château the two families separated until dinner-time, but by the side of his wife, tranquilly seated near her sleeping child, George Fromont continually thought of the brilliant Sidonie, whose voice was ringing in triumphant trills through the leafy arcades of the garden.

While his château was transformed by the caprices of a young and beautiful woman, old Gardinois continued to lead the narrowed existence of a weary man of property, lazy and impotent. What he had hitherto found to amuse him best, had been acting the part of a spy. The coming and going of his servants, the conversations held about him in the kitchen, the baskets of vegetables and fruit brought every morning from the garden to the pantry, were the objects of continual investigation on his part. He had no greater pleasure than that of finding some one in fault. At meals, amid the silence of the guests, he re-

lated these misdeeds, the tricks he practised to lead to their discovery, the culprit's terror and supplication.

For this perpetual watching of his people the good man had selected a stone seat, buried in the gravel behind an immense paulownia tree. Without reading or so much as thinking he spent whole days there, spying who went in or out. He had other arrangements for the night. In the ceiling of the great entrance hall, reached by steps bordered with flowers, he had made an opening communicating with his own room on the floor above. A perfected acoustic apparatus was to have wafted up to him all the sounds from the ground floor, even the conversations of the servants enjoying the evening air on the door steps.

Unhappily the apparatus was too perfect. It exaggerated all these sounds, mingled them and prolonged them. The regular and continual tick-tack of a great clock, the cries of a parroquet on its perch below, the clucking of some fowl seeking a grain of corn were all that M. Gardinois could hear when he applied his ear to the tube. As to voices, these only reached him in the form of a confused baying, the murmur of a throng in which it was impossible to distinguish anything. He had not been compensated for the expense of its erection, and since then had hidden the end of his acoustic marvel in a fold of his bed curtains.

One night the good man who had just dropped off to sleep was suddenly awakened by the creaking of a door. At that hour it was extraordinary enough. All the household was asleep, one heard only the paws of the watch dogs on the gravel without. A fine occasion this for using his tube! Placing it to his ear M. Gardinois made sure he was not mistaken. The noise continued. First one door was opened, then another. The lock of the hall door turned with difficulty. But neither Pyramus nor Thisbe nor even Kiss, that terrible Newfoundland, had stirred. He arose softly to ascertain who were these singular thieves who went out instead of breaking in, and between the laths of his blinds this is what he saw.

A tall slender man, with something of the outline of George, gave his arm to a woman in a lace hood. They stopped first of all at the seat under the paulownia, whose branches were in full flower. It was a splendid night. The moon touching the summits of the trees filled the dense foliage with luminous flakes. The terraces white with light, the deep pools spread out and smooth,

all shone with a silent tranquil splendour as if reflected in a silver mirror. Glowworms glittered here and there at the edge of the sward.

Under the shadow of the paulownia, lost in the depths of the shade cast by the clear moonlight, the two promenaders sat silent a moment, suddenly they reappeared in the full light, and their languishing interlaced forms slowly crossed the terrace and were lost in the shubbery.

"I was sure of it," said old Gardinois to himself, in recognising them. The old peasant was enchanted with his discovery. He went back to bed without a light, laughing to himself, and in the little closet full of hunting weapons whence he had watched them, believing at first he had to deal with thieves, the rays of the moon soon only lighted up the guns arranged against the walls and the cartridge boxes of all numbers.

George and Sidonie had refound their love at the corner of the same avenue where it had first declared itself. The year which had just ended, full of hesitation, of vague struggles and resistance, seemed to have been merely a preparation for their meeting, and the fault once committed they felt astonished at having waited so long. George Fromont especially was overcome by a mad passion. He deceived his wife, his best friend ; he deceived Risler, his partner and faithful companion. Sidonie became his constant thought, and it seemed to him that he had not lived until then. As for her, her life was made up of vanities and quarrels. What she gloated over most was the humiliation of Clara. Ah ! if she had only been able to say to her—"Your husband loves me ; he deceives you for me," her delight would have been greater still. As for Risler, according to her idea, he had just what he deserved. In her old apprentice jargon in which she continued to think although she no longer spoke it, the poor man was simply an old dolt whom she had accepted in order to arrive at fortune, and old dolts are born to be deceived.

During the daytime Savigny belonged to Clara and to the child who grew while running on the gravel, laughing to the birds and to the clouds. The mother and child had the daylight and the pathways full of sunshine to themselves. The blue nights were for the clandestine meetings of George and Sidonie, who spoke low, and walked noiselessly beneath the closed shutters, while the sleeping household was blind, dumb, impassive as stone, as if ashamed to see and hear.

CHAPTER V.

SIGISMUND PLANUS TREMBLES FOR HIS CASH BOX.

"A CARRIAGE! friend Chorche; a carriage for me? What for?"

"I assure you, my dear Risler, it is indispensable. Every day our business, our connection is extending, the brougham is not enough. Besides it is not proper always to see one partner in a carriage and the other on foot. Believe me, 'tis a necessary expense, and one to be borne, of course, by the general funds of the firm. Come! resign yourself!"

It was indeed an act of resignation, for it seemed to Risler as if he had stolen something in accepting for himself the unheard of luxury of a carriage, but George insisting so strongly, he finally yielded, thinking to himself, "How pleased Sidonie will be!"

The poor man had no suspicion that Sidonie herself had chosen at Binder's a month before, the brougham George Fromont wished to offer her, and the cost of which it was pretended came out of the general fund in order not to alarm her husband.

His was a nature destined to be deceived all his life. The blindness due to his native honesty, that confidence in men and things which formed the foundation of his open character, had been for some time past supplemented by a restless absorption resulting from pondering over that Risler machine which was destined to revolutionise the manufacture of coloured wall-papers, and in his eyes represented his contribution to the firm.

When away from his model and his little workroom on the first floor his countenance constantly wore the abstracted expression of those who have their existence on one side and their thoughts on another. What happiness therefore it was for him on entering his dwelling to find his home calm, his wife in good humour, always adorned and smiling. Without understanding the reason of the change, he had observed that for

some time the "little one" was no longer the same in her treatment of him. Now she allowed him to resume his former habits, his pipe at dessert, his nap after dinner, and the meetings at the brasserie with M. Chèbe and Delobelle. Their home also was transformed, embellished; day by day comfort gave place to luxury. From such simple matters as flower-stands and a crimson drawing room, Sidonie attained the refinement of fashion, the infatuation for old furniture and rare porcelain. Her chamber was hung with pale blue silk quilted like a jewel case. A grand piano from a celebrated maker appeared in the drawing-room in place of the old one, and it was no longer twice a week but every day that the singing mistress, Madame Dobson, came with a ballad rolled up in her hand.

A singular enough type was this young woman, of American origin, with hair of a pale blond, like the pulp of a lemon, parted above a retreating forehead, and eyes of metallic blue. Her husband having forbidden her to go on the stage, she gave lessons, and sang in certain middle class drawing-rooms. By dint of living in this artificial world of vocal and instrumental melodies, she had contracted a kind of sentimental excitement, and was romance itself. In her mouth the words "love" and "passion" seemed to have eighty syllables apiece, she pronounced them with such expression. Expression! that was what Madame Dobson ranked above all things, what she vainly endeavoured to communicate to her pupil.

It was then the happy time of that "Ay Chiquita" over which Paris raved for entire seasons. Sidonie studied it conscientiously, and all the morning one heard her singing,

"On dit que tu te maries,
Tu sais que j'en puis mourir—"

"Mouri-i-i-ir!" interrupted the expressive Madame Dobson lingering over the ebony keys, and in fact she did die, lifting her light eyes to the ceiling and throwing back her head distractedly. Sidonie never could accomplish this. Her malicious eyes and saucy lips full of life, were not made for these Eolian harp sentimentalities. The airs of Offenbach or Hervé bristling with unexpected notes which can be aided by a gesture, a shake of the head, a wriggle of the body, would have suited her better, but she did not dare confess this to her languishing professor. Besides, although they had made her sing a good

deal at Mademoiselle Le Mire's, her voice was still fresh and pretty enough.

Deprived of relatives she came, little by little, to make a friend of her singing-mistress. She kept her to lunch, took her out in the new carriage, and made her assist when shopping at her purchases of dresses and jewels. The sentimental and compassionate tone of Madame Dobson invited confidence. Her continual complaints seemed to desire to draw forth others. Sidonie spoke to her of George, of their love, of the cruelty of her parents, who had forcibly married her to a man who was rich and much older than she was.

Madame Dobson showed herself at once disposed to sympathise with her, not that she was venal, but simply because she had a relish for passion, a taste for romantic intrigues. Unhappy in her own home, married to a dentist who beat her, she thought all husbands monsters, and in her eyes poor Risler was a frightful tyrant whom his wife was justified in hating. She was a useful and active confidant. Two or three times a week she bought a box at the Opera, the Italiens, or one of those little successful theatres that for a season draw all Paris. Risler imagined these all came from Madame Dobson, who could have as many as she wanted at the operatic theatres. The unhappy man was unaware that the least of these boxes for a fashionable first night often cost his partner ten or twelve pounds.

It was really too easy to deceive such a husband. His inexhaustible credulity tranquilly accepted every lie; besides he knew nothing whatever of the artificial world in which his wife began to be already well known. The few times when in the early days of their married life he had accompanied her to a theatre, he had slept shamefully, being too simple to occupy himself with the spectators and too slow to be interested in the play. He was therefore infinitely obliged to Madame Dobson for taking his place with Sidonie, which she did very willingly.

In the evening when his wife set out splendidly dressed, he regarded her admiringly without suspecting the price of her toilettes, still less who paid for them, and free from all suspicion he waited up for her drawing out his plans, in the corner by the fire, happy that he could say: "How she must be amusing herself."

On the story below the same comedy was played by the Fromonts, but with the parts reversed. There it was the wife who kept by the fireside on those evenings when, half an hour after the departure of Sidonie, the great gateway was opened

for M. Fromont's carriage taking him to his club. It was no use complaining. Business has its demands. It is at the club, round a card-table that big affairs are arranged, and it is necessary to go there in order to keep up the connection of the house. Clara believed this.

Her husband gone, she felt at first rather lonely ; she would have so liked to keep him near her, or have walked out with him and shared his pleasure. But the sight of her child crowing before the fire, kicking its chubby little feet while being undressed, quickly comforted the mother. Besides the great word "business," that state reason of traders, always recurred to assist her in her resignation.

George and Sidonie met at the theatre. Their first feeling on finding themselves together was one of gratified vanity ; they were a great deal looked at. She was really pretty now, and the eccentricities of fashion suited her so well that they seemed invented expressly for her benefit.

After a time they would leave, and Madame Dobson remained alone in the box. Little by little Sidonie grew audacious and fantastic. Since the old working days she had retained a recollection of the names of some of the public balls and famous restaurants, and to these she was now curious to go, taking the same pleasure in doing so as in passing through the double doors of the great milliners whose signs were all that she had known before. For in this love she sought to find above all a revenge for the misery and humiliations of her youth. Nothing, for instance, amused her so much, after leaving the theatre or after a drive at night in the Bois, as a supper at the Café Anglais, surrounded by luxurious dissipation. During these continual excursions she picked up modes of speaking and bearing, scraps of dubious songs, and a style of dress that introduced into the staid atmosphere of the old house of business an extravagant reflection of the Paris *cocotte* of the day.

At the factory they began to suspect something. Women of the people, even the poorest, are such acute critics of dress. When at three o'clock Madame Risler drove out, fifty pairs of curious and clear eyes ambushed behind the windows of the polishing rooms watched her pass, peering into the very depths of her guilty conscience through her black velvet dolman and cuirass of glittering jet. Without her noticing it, all the secrets of that little foolish head hovered around her like the ribbons that floated on her bare neck, while her feet, finely shod in

bronze leather boots with ten buttons, told as they pattered along of all sorts of clandestine meetings.

The work-people laughed, and whispered, "Just look at her, that's a nice way to dress for going out. You may be sure it is not to go to mass that she gets herself up like that"—"And to think that less than three years ago she went to work every morning in a waterproof, with a ha'porth of chestnuts in her pocket to keep her fingers warm. Now she rides in her carriage!" And amidst the dust of the tale and the roaring of the stoves, which were always red-hot both in winter and summer, more than one poor girl thought of these caprices of fortune suddenly changing the existence of one like themselves, and began to dream of a future vaguely magnificent, that perhaps was awaiting her without her suspecting it.

In the eyes of the world, Risler was a deceived husband. In the printing-room, two machine men, who were constant frequenters of the Folies Dramatiques, had several times seen Madame Risler at that theatre with some gentleman or other who remained hidden at the back of the box. Old Achille, too, related surprising things, and every one felt sure Sidonie had a lover.

But no one as yet suspected young Fromont, although she exercised no prudence in her relations with him; on the contrary, she seemed to impart to them a sort of ostentation, and it was this perhaps that averted suspicion. How often had she imprudently stopped him on the door-step to arrange a meeting for the next evening. How often had she gratified herself by looking him full in the eyes and making him tremble before them all. The first stupor over, George was pleased with these audacities, which he attributed to an excess of passion. He was mistaken. What Sidonie really desired was that Clara should witness them, that she should peer at them from behind her window-curtains, and have a suspicion of what was going on. All in vain! Clara Fromont perceived nothing, and lived like Risler in imperturbable serenity.

It was only the old cashier, Sigismond Planus, who was really uneasy. It was not, however, of Sidonie that he thought, as with pen behind his ear he paused over his accounts to muse in deep study. He thought only of his master, of M. Chorche, who now drew so much money from the cash-box for his current expenses and deranged all his accounts. Each time it was on some fresh pretence. He would come to the wicket and say almost gaily:

"Have you a little money to spare, Planus? I was cleaned out at play last night, and I don't want to send to the bank for so small an amount."

Sigismond would open the cash-box with regret to take out the required sum, fearfully remembering the day when M. George, then only twenty years of age, had confessed to his uncle that he owed some thousands of francs lost at play. Ever since then he had held that club in abhorrence and all its members in contempt. One day a rich tradesman, one of its members, came to the factory, and Planus said to him, with his usual frankness:

"The deuce take your club of the Château d'Eau; in two months M. George has lost 30,000 francs amongst you."

The other began to laugh. "You are mistaken, Planus; for three months at least, we have never set eyes on your governor."

The cashier said no more, but a terrible thought intruded itself in his mind. If George Fromont did not go to his club, wherever did he spend his evenings, where did he get rid of so much money? Evidently there must be some woman at the bottom of it all; and when this idea entered his head Planus began to tremble for his cash-box in earnest. This old bear from the canton of Berne, having been all his life a bachelor, had, as regards women in general and Parisiennes in particular, a frightful dread. Above all, to put his conscience at rest, he thought he ought to warn Risler. He did this, however, in a manner somewhat vague.

"M. Chorche spends a great deal of money," said he, one day.

"What would you have me do, Sigismond, old fellow. He has the right," was Risler's reply. And the honest fellow thought as he spoke. In his eyes young Fromont was absolute master of the house; it would have been a fine thing for him, Risler, the ex-designer, to make remarks.

The cashier dared say no more, until one day a clerk from a famous shawl warehouse came with a bill for six thousand francs for a cashmere. He sought George in his office. "Must I pay this, sir?" George Fromont was a little startled. Sidonie had forgotten to tell him of the new purchase. She took things easily with him now.

"Pay it, pay it, Planus," said he with a shade of embarrassment; adding, "Place it to my account. It is a commission I was charged with."

That evening Sigismond, when lighting his little lamp, saw

Risler coming across the garden, and tapped upon the pane to attract his notice.

"It is a woman," said he in a low voice. "Now I have proof of it."

In pronouncing that terrible word "woman" his voice trembled with fear, and was lost in the roar of the factory. The surrounding noise appeared sinister at this moment to the unhappy cashier. It seemed to him that all the moving machines, the immense chimney vomiting forth jets of smoke, the tumult of the workmen at their different occupations, all was grinding, labouring, fatiguing itself merely for a mysterious little being dressed in velvet and decked with jewels.

Risler made fun of him and would not believe it. He had long known his old compatriot's mania for seeing in all things the pernicious influence of woman. Still the words of Planus sometimes recurred to him, especially in the evenings, in his moments of solitude, when Sidonie, setting out for the theatre with Madame Dobson after all the bustle of her toilette, left the room very empty when her long train had crossed the threshold.

Candles burning before the mirrors, small articles of the toilet scattered here and there, told of extravagant caprices and reckless expenditure. Risler saw nothing in all this, only when he heard George's carriage roll out of the court-yard he felt a chill of uneasiness in thinking that on the floor below Madame Fromont passed her evenings all alone. "Poor woman! If, after all, what Planus said was true? If George had an establishment in town? Oh! that would be frightful."

So instead of sitting down to work he descended softly to inquire if Madame Fromont was visible, believing it to be his duty to keep her company.

The baby was already in bed, but the little cap and the little blue shoes were still lying before the fire with some toys. Clara read or worked beside her silent mother, who was always rubbing or dusting feverishly, exhausting herself by persistently breathing over and over again on her watch-case, continually putting the same object in the same place with a little nervous gesture.

The good Risler himself was not a very gay companion, but that did not prevent the young woman welcoming him with kindness. She knew all that was said against Sidonie in the factory, and although she did not believe half of it, the sight

of this poor fellow whose wife neglected him so much touched her to the heart. A reciprocal pity was the foundation of these quiet relations, and it was touching to see these two forsaken ones mutually complaining and seeking to distract themselves.

Seated beside a well-lighted little table in the middle of the room Risler felt penetrated by the warmth of the hearth, the harmony of the surroundings. He saw furniture he had been familiar with for twenty years, and the portrait of his old master ; while his dear Madame "Chorche" bending near him over some delicate sewing appeared younger and more amiable still amid these old souvenirs.

From time to time she rose to pass into the adjoining room to look at her sleeping child, whose light breathing was heard in the intervals of silence. Without knowing why, Risler found himself better, warmer than at home, for at times his fine apartment, constantly open for hasty departures or returns, gave him the impression of a large hall without doors or windows, open to the four winds. Upstairs, one encamped ; here, one was at home. A careful hand disposed everything with order and taste, the chairs in groups seemed to be gossiping together in a low tone, the fire burnt with a pleasant sound, and the little cap of Mademoiselle Fromont had preserved, in every one of its blue ribbon bows, the sweet smiles and looks of the child. And while Clara thought that so excellent a man merited a better companion in life, Risler, looking at the calm and beautiful face turned towards him with kind and expressive eyes, asked himself, "for what hussy George Fromont deserted so adorable a wife."

CHAPTER VI.

THE STOCK-TAKING.

THE house old Planus inhabited at Montrouge, next door to that occupied for a short time by the Chèbes, had a corresponding single storey raised above a ground floor with three windows, and a similar trellised garden, with borders of green box. The old cashier lived there with his sister, and went up to Paris by the first omnibus that left in the morning, returning in time for dinner. On Sundays he stayed at home to tend his flowers and his poultry. The old maid did the house-work, the cooking and the sewing. Never were couple more happy; both single they were united by a common hatred of marriage. The sister abhorred all men, the brother looked on all women with suspicion, but they adored each other, considering each to be an exception to the general perversity of the sex.

In speaking of him, she always said, "Monsieur Planus, my brother," and he with the same affectionate solemnity, placed "Mademoiselle Planus, my sister," in the middle of all his phrases. For these two artless and timid souls, Paris, of which they were entirely ignorant, though traversing it every day, was a haunt of monsters of both sexes, occupied in doing the greatest possible amount of evil, and when some conjugal drama, some gossip of the neighbourhood reached their ears, each accused a different culprit.

"It is the husband's fault," said "Mademoiselle Planus, my sister."

"It is the fault of the wife," answered "Monsieur Planus, my brother."

"Oh! the men."

"Oh! the women."

And this was their eternal subject of discussion in the rare hours of lounging that old Sigismond allowed himself during the day, which was filled up and ruled as accurately as his cash books were. Lately, especially, the brother and sister

had imparted an extraordinary animation into their debates. What was passing at the factory occupied them greatly. The sister pitied Madame Fromont, and found the conduct of her husband quite unworthy; while, as for Sigismond, he could find no words bitter enough against the unknown hussy who had cashmeres at six thousand francs out of the firm's cash-box. In his eyes, the honour and glory of the old house he had served from his youth were at stake.

"What will become of us?" he cried continually. "Oh! the women."

One day, Mademoiselle Planus was seated, knitting by the fire, waiting for her brother. The dinner had been ready half an hour, and the old lady was growing uneasy at such unprecedented lateness, when Sigismond entered, with troubled face and without uttering a word, contrary to his usual habit. He waited until the door was well closed, then in reply to a questioning and anxious look from his sister, said in a low voice:

"I have news, I know who the woman is who is ruining us."

In still lower tones, after looking cautiously round the room, he pronounced a name, one so utterly unexpected, that Mademoiselle made him repeat it twice over.

"Is it possible?" she exclaimed.

"It is quite true."

And in spite of his sorrow, he assumed almost an air of triumph. But the old maid could not bring herself to believe it.

"A person so well-bred—so polite—who had received her with so much cordiality! Could it be supposed?"

"I have proofs," said Sigismond Planus.

Then he told her how old Achille, one evening at eleven o'clock, had seen George and Sidonie entering a little hotel in the Montmartre quarter, and "that man does not lie, one has known him for a long time. Besides, others had seen them. They talked of nothing else at the factory. Risler alone suspected nothing."

"But it is your duty to inform him," declared Mademoiselle Planus.

The cashier looked grave. "This is a very delicate affair; who knows, in the first place, if he would believe me? There are blind men who are so blind. Besides, if I step between the two partners I risk losing my place, Oh! the women, the women! To think that Risler might have been so happy! When I helped him to come to Paris with his brother, he hadn't

a sou, and to-day he is at the head of one of the first houses in Paris. Do you think he was satisfied with that? Ah, no! my gentleman must needs marry, as if there was any need of marrying, and what is more, he must marry a Parisienne, one of those ill-bred bits of girls that are the ruin of an honest house, when he had close at hand, a good girl, near his own age, a daughter of his own country, accustomed to work, and a fine figure, though it is I who say it."

"Mademoiselle. Planus, my sister," whose frame was here alluded to, had now a superb opportunity to exclaim, "Oh! the men, the men!" but she kept silent; for it was a very delicate question, and in fact, if Risler had asked in time, he would have been the only——.

Old Sigismond continued: "And see where we are now! For three months the first house in Paris for paper-hangings has been hooked on to the flounces of this good-for-nothing creature. You should see the money fly! All day I do nothing but satisfy the demands of M. George. It is always to me that he comes, because at his banker's it would be too notorious; while with the cash-box the money comes—goes, enters—leaves; but look out for the balance-sheet, there will be a pretty finish to this year's accounts. The worst is, Risler will listen to nothing. Several times I have warned him, and said, 'Take care, M. George is making a fool of himself for some woman.' Either he goes off, shrugging his shoulders, or he answers, 'It is nothing to do with him, and that Fromont is the master.' Really, it is enough to make one believe—to make one believe——" The cashier did not finish his phrase, but his silence was very suggestive.

The old maid was stricken with consternation, but like most women in such cases, instead of looking for a remedy, she lost herself in a crowd of regrets and lamentations.

What a pity they had not known it before, when the Chèbes were neighbours. Madame Chèbe was such an honourable person, one might have persuaded her to watch Sidonie, to speak to her seriously.

"Ah, that's an idea," interrupted Planus, "you must go to the Rue du Mail and warn the parents. I had thought at first of writing to young Frank, he always had great influence with his brother, and is the only one in the world who could tell him certain things. But Frank is so far away, and it would be terrible to have to come to that. Poor Risler, he fills me with

pity all the same. No, the best way is to speak to Madame Chèbe. Will you undertake this?"

The commission was a dangerous one; Mademoiselle Planus made some objections, but she never had known how to resist her brother's will, and the hope of being useful to their old friend Risler eventually decided her.

Thanks to his son-in-law's good nature, M. Chèbe had realised his new fancy. For three months he had been living at his famous shop in the Rue du Mail. The quarter was astonished at this shop without goods, the shutters of which were opened regularly every morning and closed every night, like those of a wholesale house. Shelves had been fitted up all round, and there was a new counter, a safe, and a pair of large scales. M. Chèbe, in short, possessed all the requisites for carrying on some kind of trade, without precisely knowing which one to select.

He thought of it all the day, walking up and down the shop encumbered with certain large pieces of furniture which they had not been able to get into the room at the back. He thought of it also as he stood with a pen behind his ear in the doorway, watching with delight the turmoil of Parisian commerce around him; the salesmen passing to and fro with their sample-books under their arms, the heavy vans, the omnibuses, the porters, the hand-trucks, the unloading of wares at the neighbouring doors, the bales of stuffs and trimmings, that picked up some of the mud of the gutters before entering the cellars, those dark holes filled with riches, where the fortune of the house is germinating; all this charmed M. Chèbe. He amused himself in guessing the contents of the packages, he was first in the crowd when some bale fell on a pedestrian's foot, or when some impatient and unruly van horses rendered the long vehicle, drawn up across the street an obstacle to all circulation. He had besides, the thousand amusements of a petty trader without customers, the downfall of rain, accidents, thefts, quarrels and the like.

At the close of the day, bewildered, stunned, wearied with the labours of others, stretching himself in his arm-chair, he would say to his wife, wiping his forehead, "Ah! this is the life that suits me! an active life!"

Madame Chèbe smiled softly without replying. Habituated to all the caprices of her husband, she had made herself as comfortable as she could in the back-shop looking out on a dark

court, and consoled herself by thinking of the former prosperity of her parents, of the good fortune of her daughter; being always neatly dressed she had already won the respect of the tradespeople and neighbours. All she asked was not to be confounded with the wives of workmen often less poor than herself, but to retain in spite of all some kind of middle class rank. That was her constant preoccupation, and for this reason the backroom where she lived, and where it was dark at three o'clock, invariably shone with order and cleanliness. In the day-time a bed folded up formed a couch, an old shawl figured as a tablecloth, the chimney-piece, enclosed by a folding screen, served as a kitchen, and over a stove about the size of a foot-warmer, the dishes cooked unobtrusively. Quiet—that was the dream of this poor woman disturbed by all the tergiversations of a troublesome companion.

At the very outset, M. Chèbe had had written in letters a foot high on the fresh paint of his shop front the words—"COMMISSION—EXPORTATION." No mention was made of anything special. His neighbours sold muslins, cloths, linens; whereas he was disposed to sell everything without knowing exactly what. What arguments pro and con he inflicted on Madame Chèbe in the evenings before going to bed!

"I don't understand linens, but I can answer for cloths. Only if I sell cloths I shall have to get a traveller. The best kinds come from Sedan and Elbeuf. Printed cottons I need not speak about, summer is the time for these. As for muslin, it is out of the question, the season is too far advanced." Generally he ended the discussion by saying:

"Night brings counsel, come let us go to bed." And to bed he would go to the great relief of his wife.

In two or three months M. Chèbe grew weary of this kind of existence. Headaches and giddiness returned; the quarter was noisy and unhealthy. Besides business did not flourish. There was nothing doing in cloths, or stuffs. Nothing!

It was just at this moment of a new crisis that "Mademoiselle Planus, my sister" paid her visit in reference to Sidonie. The poor lady kept saying to herself all the way, "It must be broken gradually," but like all timid people, she at once got rid of her burthen in the first few words she uttered on entering the place.

It was a perfect thunder-clap. Hearing her daughter accused Madame Chèbe rose quite indignant. Never would any

one make her believe such a thing, poor Sidonie was the victim of some infamous calumny.

M. Chèbe took it very loftily, with set phrases and movements of the head, connecting everything with himself as usual. How could any one suppose a child of his, a demoiselle Chèbe, daughter of an honourable trader, known in the business world for thirty years, could be capable of—

Mademoiselle Planus insisted. It was painful to her to appear a tattler, a scandal-monger; but there was certain proof; it was a secret to nobody.

"And suppose it is true," cried Mr. Chèbe, furious at her insistence, "what have we to do with it? Our daughter is married, she lives far from her parents, it is for her husband, who is much older than she, to counsel her, to guide her. Has he ever thought of it?"

Thereupon the little man began to throw the blame on his son-in-law, that sluggish-blooded Swiss who passed his life in his office, inventing machines, refusing to accompany his young wife into society, and preferring his bachelor habits, his pipe, and his brasserie to everything.

You should have seen with what an air of aristocratic disdain M. Chèbe pronounced these words "his brasserie," and yet he went there almost every night to meet Risler, and overwhelmed him with reproaches if he once missed coming.

At the bottom of all this the trader of the Rue du Mail had one clear idea. He had been wishing to give up his shop, to retire from business, and for some time past he had been thinking of going to see Sidonie, to interest her in his new combinations. This then was not the time to make disagreeable scenes, to speak of paternal authority and conjugal honour.

As to Madame Chèbe, less certain than at first of the infallibility of her daughter, she took refuge in the deepest silence. The poor woman wished she had been deaf, blind, and had never known Mademoiselle Planus. Like all those who have been very unfortunate she loved to lull herself into a false tranquillity, and ignorance seemed to her preferable to everything. Life then was not already sad enough, and after all Sidonie had always been a good girl, and why not a good wife?

Daylight was drawing to a close. M. Chèbe gravely rose to shut the shutters of the shop, and light a jet of gas which exposed the nakedness of the walls, the empty shelves. The singular aspect of the place recalled the morrow of a bankruptcy.

Silent, with mouth drawn in disdainfully, he seemed to be saying to the old lady, "The day is ended; it is time for you to go home." And all the while she could hear Madame Chèbe sobbing in the back shop while preparing the supper.

Mademoiselle Planus had her journey for nothing. "Well!" said old Sigismond, who had been awaiting her with impatience.

"They would not believe me, and politely showed me the door." Tears filled her eyes from sheer mortification. The old man coloured up, and taking her hand with much respect said:—

"Mademoiselle Planus my sister, I beg your pardon for having caused you to take this step, but it concerned the honour of the house of Fromont."

From this time forward, Sigismond became more and more sad; his cash-box seemed to him no longer sure and solid. Even when Fromont did not ask for money, he felt alarmed and summed up all his fears in a phrase which came to his lips continually when talking with his sister:—"I have no confidence," said he, with his heavy German accent.

Always preoccupied about his cash box, he sometimes dreamed that with its sides disjointed, it remained open in spite of all his turnings of the key, or that a great gust of wind scattered the papers, the bills, the cheques, the receipts, and that he ran after them all over the factory, exhausting himself in trying to collect them. In the daytime, when engaged with his books he would fancy that a little white mouse had got into the safe and was gnawing and destroying everything and growing fatter and prettier as the destruction went on.

When in the middle of the afternoon Sidonie tripped out on the doorstep in all her pretty plumage, old Sigismond trembled with rage. He saw in her the ruin of the house,—Ruin in a splendid dress, with her little carriage at the door, and wearing the tranquil air of a fortunate coquette.

Madame Risler did not suspect that at the ground floor window an enemy was watching her slightest actions, the most minute details of her daily life, the coming and going of her music mistress, the visit of the fashionable dressmaker in the morning, all the band boxes that were brought, the laced cap of the messenger from the "Magazins du Louvre," whose heavy van stopped at the gate with a clatter, like a vehicle drawn by strong horses about to carry off the form of Fromont to bankruptcy at full speed.

Sigismond counted the parcels, summed up their contents at a glance, and peered curiously through the open windows into the interior of Risler's household. The carpets that were shaken with great commotion, the green flower-stands put out in the sun full of rare and expensive sickly flowers, now out of season, the bright coloured hangings, nothing whatever escaped him; all the new acquisitions of the household were perceptible to him and were each associated in his mind with some large demand for money.

But most of all he studied the countenance of Risler. It seemed to him that this woman was turning his friend, the best, the most honest of men, into a shameless scoundrel; not the least doubt about it. Risler knew his dishonour, he accepted it, he was paid to be silent.

Certainly there was something monstrous in such a supposition. But it is the habit of ingenuous natures who hear of evil without being familiar with it, to rush all at once to extremes. Once convinced of the treachery of Sidonie and George, the infamy of Risler had seemed to the cashier *loss impossible to believe*, and besides, how could his indifference to his partner's expenditure be otherwise explained.

The good Sigismond, in his narrow plodding honesty, could not comprehend the delicacy of Risler's heart. His methodical book-keeper's habits, and his business foresight were a hundred leagues apart from this abstracted slow nature, half artist, half inventor. He judged everything by his own standard, unable to divine what a man is with a mania for invention and absorbed in a fixed idea. Such men are somnambulists. They look without seeing, their eyes turned within.

Sigismond believed that Risler did see.

This thought made the old cashier very unhappy. He began by trying to stare his friend out of countenance, every time he entered the counting-house; then disgusted at the impassable indifference of his face which he thought was assumed as a mask, he ended by busying himself over his accounts or looking out of the window whenever he had occasion to speak to Risler. His words were as bewildered as his looks. One never positively knew whom he was addressing.

There was no longer the same friendly smile, no longer the turning over together of leaves and memories in the cash-book of the house: "Here is the year you entered the factory, here is your first increase of salary. Do you remember we dined

together at Douix that day, and spent the evening at the Café des Aveuglés? Ah! what a spree we had?"

At last Risler perceived the singular coldness of his friend, and spoke of it to his wife. For some time she had felt the antipathy that was gathering round her. Occasionally, on crossing the court, she was embarrassed by malevolent glances which made her turn nervously towards the niche of the old cashier. This misunderstanding between the two old friends alarmed her, and she quickly sought to put her husband on his guard against any evil insinuation regarding her on the part of Planus.

"Do you not see he is jealous of you, of your position? A former equal has now become his superior, and that aggravates him. But if one is to feel troubled about this spite, why I, even I, am completely surrounded with it here."

The good Risler opened his large eyes: "You?"

"Yes, I! It is plain that all the people detest me, they have a grudge against the little Chêbe for having become Madame Risler. God knows what infamies they spread abroad regarding me, and your old cashier does not keep his tongue still, I can assure you. He's a wicked man!"

These few words had their effect. Risler, indignant, and too proud to complain, met coldness with coldness. Thus these two honest men, full of mistrust of each other, could not come in contact without a painful feeling, so that after a time, Risler ended by never entering the counting-house. This was attended with no difficulty, as young Fromont had charge of all the money matters. Risler's cash-drawings for the month were regularly sent up to him, which gave additional facilities to Sidonie and George to practise a host of infamous jugglings.

Sidonie was then occupied in completing her programme of luxurious life. She wanted a country house, though at heart she detested the country, the trees, the fields, and the roads, where you were smothered in dust. "It's about the dullest thing in the world," she used to say. But then Clara Fromont passed the summer at Sevigny. With the first fine days, they packed their trunks in the story below, took down the window curtains, and a great furniture-van, in which the cradle rocked its blue hull, started off for the grandfather's château.

Then one morning, the mother, the grandmother, the child, and the nurse, a confused mass of white stuffs and loose veils, would set out with a pair of horses, at a sharp trot, towards

the sunshine of the lawns and the softened shadow of the leafy avenues.

Paris was then unsightly, depopulated, and although Sidonie loved it—even in the summer season which heated it like a furnace—it vexed her to think of all the elegance and wealth of Paris walking along the beach, under their light parasols, and making the trip a pretext for a thousand new inventions, those risky and original fashions, which allow of one's showing that one has a pretty leg, and long curly chestnut hair which is really one's own.

Still it was useless thinking of the seaside, for Risler could not stay away. Buy a country-house? They had not the means. Certainly there was the lover who desired nothing better than to satisfy this new caprice, but a country house cannot be hidden like a bracelet or a cashmere shawl. It must be accepted by the husband, and to accomplish this was by no means easy; still with Risler it might be tried.

To prepare the way she began to talk to him incessantly of a little place in the country, not too dear, quite close to Paris. Risler listened smiling. He thought of the tall grass, of the orchard full of fruit, for he was already tormented by those desires which come with fortune; but he was prudent, so he simply said: "We shall see, we shall see, wait until the end of the year."

The end of the year—this meant when the balance sheet was made out. The balance sheet: magic words! All the year one continues on and on amidst the whirl of business; money comes, goes, circulates, brings more, again disperses, and the fortune of the house, like a brilliant snake, unseizable, and always in motion, lengthens, contracts, diminishes, and expands without it being possible to verify its condition until a moment of repose. It is only after stock-taking that one knows what the condition really is, and whether the year, which has been good to all appearances, is so in reality.

Usually stock is taken towards the end of December, on the approach of Christmas and the New Year. As it demands additional labour, those engaged on it remain far into the night. All the house is on the alert, the lamps that remain alight in the offices after closing time, seem to partake of the festive air that animates the last week of the year, when so many windows are lighted up for family parties. Every one, down to the humblest servant of the house, is interested in the result of this

stock-taking. The raising of salaries, and the new year's bonuses depend upon its happy figures. So while the important annual results of a large factory are being ascertained, the workmen's wives, children, and old relatives, upon fifth floors or in little suburban apartments, gossip of the balance-sheet, the effect of which will be felt either in the practice of more strict economy, or in some purchase, long deferred, which the expected bonus will at last render possible.

At Fromont and Risler's, Sigismond Planus is for the time being the titular divinity of the house, and his little office a sanctuary in which all the clerks toil early and late. In the silence of the sleeping factory the heavy pages of the huge ledgers rustle loudly as they are turned over. Names called out lead to researches in other books. Pens scratch over the paper; the old cashier, surrounded by his lieutenants, has a busy and terrible air. From time to time young Fromont, about to drive out in his carriage, comes in with a cigar in his mouth and walks on tiptoes to the cashier's table: "Well! how are you getting on?"

"Sigismond gives a grunt, and the young master hurries off without daring to ask any more; he guesses well enough from the cashier's air that the news will be bad.

And in fact, since the days of the Revolution when they fought in the courts of the factory, never had such a pitiable balance sheet been known in the house of Fromont. Expenses and receipts balanced themselves. The ordinary expenditure had swallowed up everything, and moreover young Fromont stood indebted to the firm in important sums.

You should have seen the dismayed look of old Planus when on the 31st December he went to render his accounts to George. But the latter took it very gaily. All would go better soon. And to cheer up the cashier he gave him the extraordinary bonus of a thousand francs, instead of the five hundred which used formerly to be given by his uncle. Every one else shared the effects of this generous disposition, and in the universal gratification the deplorable results of the year's accounts were soon forgotten.

As to Risler George himself undertook to acquaint him with the state of affairs. When he entered the little office of his partner where the light from above fell perpendicularly on the inventor, Fromont had a moment of hesitation, a sense of shame and remorse at what he was about to do.

The other at the noise of the opening door turned round joyfully, exclaiming: "Chorche! Chorche! my boy, I have it, our new printing machine—there are still one or two little things to work out. But all the same, I am now certain of the affair. You will see, you will see. The Prochaisons may sweat away as much as they please. With the Risler machine we shall upset all competition."

"Bravo! my dear fellow, so much for the future, but you don't think of the present, of the balance sheet!"

"That's true, I had not thought of it. It is not very brilliant, is it? He spoke thus as he noted that the physiognomy of George was slightly anxious and embarrassed.

The other replied, "Oh! yes, on the contrary it is most brilliant. We have every reason to be satisfied, especially as it is our first year; we have each forty thousand francs profit, and as I thought you might possibly need money to buy some New Year's gifts for your wife—"

Without daring to look the honest man he was deceiving in the face, Fromont placed on the table a bundle of cheques and notes. Risler experienced a moment of emotion. So much money and for him, for him alone! He thought at once of the generosity of these Fromonts who had made him what he was, and then of his little Sidonie, and the wish so often expressed by her which he could now gratify. With tears in his eyes and a smile on his lips, he held out both hands to his partner saying:

"I am so happy—I am so happy."

This was his expression on all great occasions; then pointing to the bundle of notes before him, "Do you know what that is?" said he to George with an air of triumph. "That is Sidonie's country house."

"Exactly."

CHAPTER VII.

A LETTER.

To M. Frank Risler, Engineer to the French Company,
Ismalia, Egypt.

Frank, my boy, it is old Sigismond who writes to you. If I knew better how to put my ideas on paper, I should have much to tell you. But this cursed French is too difficult, and away from his figures, Sigismond Planus is worth nothing, so I shall tell you as quickly as I can what is the matter. There are things going on in your brother's house which ought not to be.

His wife deceives him with his partner. She has rendered her husband ridiculous, and if this continues, he will be thought a scoundrel. Listen to me, Frank, you must return at once, it is only you who can speak to Risler and open his eyes ; he will not believe any one else.

Quick then, ask for leave, and come. I know you have your bread to earn over there, your fortune to make, but a man of honour ought to hold the name his parents have left him above everything. Well ! I tell you that unless you come at once, the time will very soon be here when your name of Risler will be so stained with shame, that you will no longer care to bear it.

SIGISMOND PLANUS,
Cashier.

BOOK III.

CHAPTER I.

THE AVENGER.

PERSONS who live always shut up, tied to their window corners by their work or their infirmities, just as they make a horizon of the neighbouring walls, roofs, and windows, so do they also interest themselves in the people that pass.

Stationary themselves, they still mix themselves up, as it were, in the life passing in the street, and all these busy people, who appear to them—sometimes every day, at the same hour—scarcely guess that they are watched by eyes which would miss them if they happened to take another road.

Madame and Mademoiselle Delobelle, confined within doors during the day, indulged in these mute observations. As the window was narrow, the mother, whose eyes had become weakened with work, placed herself near the light, against the looped-up muslin curtain with the daughter's great armchair beside her, but a little further off. She announced to Désirée the passers-by; it was an amusement, a subject of gossip, and the long hours of work appeared shorter, varied as they were, by the regular appearance of people as busy as themselves. There were the two little sisters, the gentleman in the grey overcoat, the child that was taken to school and brought back again, and the old clerk with a wooden leg, whose step had a hollow sound on the pavement. Him they hardly saw, for he passed when night had already fallen, but they heard him, and the sound always seemed to the little cripple like an echo of her saddest thoughts. All these friends occupied the minds of the two women without knowing it. If it rained, the Delobelles said, "Will the child reach home before the downfall?" And at the change of seasons when the sun of March lighted up the watery pavement, or when the snows of December covered it with their white flakes, the appearance of a new coat on one of their friends, set the two recluses thinking, "Summer has come," or, "Winter is here."

At the end of a day in May, one of those light and warm evenings when the close indoor existence finds relief in the fresh air blowing in through the open windows, Désirée and her mother plied their needles and their fingers actively, utilising the fading daylight to its very last rays before lighting the lamp. They heard the cries of the children playing in the courts, the sound of pianos softened by distance, and the voice of some hawker dragging along his half empty truck. They felt the spring in the air, a vague perfume of lilac and hyacinths. Madame Delobelle had just laid aside her work, and, before closing the window, was listening with her elbows on the rail to all the noises of a great laborious city, the toilers happy to circulate in the street, now that the work of the day was done. From time to time she made remarks to her daughter without turning round.

"There is M. Sigismond. How early he is leaving the factory this evening. Perhaps, though, it is the lengthening days, but to me it hardly seems seven o'clock yet. Who is the old cashier with, though? It is very queer; one would say—yes, one would say it was M. Frank—that's not possible, though—M. Frank is a long way from here, and beside he had no beard. All the same, it is very much like him. Look, lassie!"

But the lassie does not leave her chair, she does not even move. With her eyes fixed, her needle in the air, petrified in her pretty gesture of activity, she has taken flight to fairy land, that marvellous country to which one goes freely, careless of any infirmity. This name of Frank, pronounced mechanically by her mother on detecting a chance resemblance, was for her a whole past of illusions, of warm hopes fleeting as the blood that mounted to her cheeks when in the evening on his return home he used to come for a few moments to speak to her. How far off all that is now! To think that he lived in the little room adjoining, that one heard his step on the stairs, and his ease! when he dragged it near the window to draw! How sad and sweet it was to hear him talk of Sidonie, when seated at her feet in a low chair while she arranged her birds and beetles. When he went away in despair he left behind him a love greater than that he bore within himself, a love which her sedentary life preserved intact, whilst his, as it were, evaporated little by little.

The day closed in suddenly, deep sadness stole over the poor

girl with the shadows of the sweet evening. This happy gleam of the past faded for her like the strip of daylight in the narrow window-frame where the mother was still resting on her elbows.

Suddenly the door opened. Some one is there whom they cannot well make out! Who can it be? The Delobelles never receive visits. The mother, who has turned round, believes at first that it is some one from the shop come for the week's work.

"My husband has just gone to you, please, sir," she remarks. "We have nothing more here; M. Delobelle has taken every thing back."

The man advances without replying, and as he approaches the window his outline becomes more distinct. A great, strong, bronzed fellow with a thick fair beard, a deep voice and a slightly heavy accent.

"Well, come, Madame Delobelle, you don't remember me, then?"

"Oh yes, Monsieur Frank, I recognised you at once," said Désirée quite tranquilly, in a cold firm tone.

"Mercy! it is Monsieur Frank!"

Quick, quick, Madame Delobelle runs to the lamp, lights it, closes the window. "What! and is it you, my dear Frank! How calmly this child said, 'I recognised you.' Ah! the little icicle, she will always be the same!"

A true little icicle indeed. She is pale, very pale, and in the hand of Frank her hand lies perfectly white and cold. He thinks her improved, more refined. She thinks him superb as ever, with an expression of weariness and sorrow in the depths of his eyes, that makes him more manly than when he went away.

This weary look comes from his hurried journey, taken on the receipt of Sigismond's terrible letter. Goaded by the word dishonour, he started at once, without waiting for leave, risking his fortune and his place, and taking mail steamer and express train, not stopping until he reached Paris. He had cause to be weary. His sorrow dates from further back, from the day when she whom he loved refused to marry him, to become six months later the wife of his brother. Two terrible blows, one after the other, and the second still more severe than the first.

It is true that before his marriage Risler the elder had written to ask Frank's permission to be happy, and in terms so touching and tender that the violence of the blow was a little

softened. Then at last the distant country, the work, the long journeys he had to make had worn out his grief, and there remained in him only a profound melancholy. At least, if the hate and rage he feels at this moment against the woman who dishonours his brother be not after all something of his former love.

But no. Frank thinks only of avenging the honour of the Rislers; it is not as a lover but as an avenger that he comes, and Sidonie must beware.

Straight from the railway carriage the avenger had gone to the factory, counting on the surprise, the unexpectedness of his arrival, to reveal to him at a glance what was going on. Unfortunately he had found no one there, the blinds of the little mansion in the garden had been closed for a fortnight.

Old Achille informed him that both the ladies had gone to their respective country houses where the two partners rejoined them every evening. Young Fromont had left the works at an early hour, Risler had just gone. Frank decided to speak to old Sigismond, but it was Saturday—pay-day, and he had to wait while a long file of work-people extending from Achille's lodge to the cashier's wicket, gradually passed away.

Though sad and impatient, the good fellow who had lived from childhood the life of a workman of Paris, found a pleasure in being once more in the centre of this animation and these peculiar ways. All the faces, honest or vicious, expressed contentment at the week's work being over. One felt that Sunday began for them on Saturday night at seven o'clock before the cashier's little lamp.

One must have lived amongst men of business to realise all the charm and solemnity of this day of rest. Many poor people, tied to unhealthy occupations, look forward to this blessed refuge as a breath of respirable air essential to their health and life. So, what cheerfulness, what impulse towards noisy gaiety! It seems as if the oppression of the week's work was dissipated with the steam from the engine, which escapes hissing and fuming above the gutters.

All the workmen left the cashier's wicket counting the bright money in their grimy hands. There were deceptions, murmurs, remonstrances, questions of time lost, money advanced; but above all rose the voice of Sigismond, calm and pitiless, sternly defending the interests of his employers.

Frank knew well all this drama of the pay-night—the false intonations and the true. He knew that where one man re-

monstrated on behalf of his family, to pay the baker, the apothecary, the month's schooling, another wanted money for the wine-shop, or worse. The melancholy shadows passing to and fro before the gates of the factory, casting long looks into the court, he knew what they were waiting for, that each was watching for some father or husband, to take him quickly home with a grumbling or persuasive voice.

Oh! the barefooted children, the babies, wrapt up in old shawls, the sordid women whose faces washed by tears were nearly as white as the linen caps surrounding them. Oh! the ambushed vice that lurked round the place of payment, the rooms lit up at the bottom of dark streets, the dull windows of cabarets where alcohol in a thousand poisonous forms displayed its treacherous hues.

Frank knew all these miseries, but never had they seemed to him so gloomy, so painful, as on this evening.

Payments ended, Sigismond came out of his office. The two friends recognised and embraced each other, and amidst the silence of the factory at rest for four-and-twenty hours and mute in all its empty anterooms, the cashier explained to Frank the state of things. He told him of the mad conduct of Sidonie, of the reckless expenditure, of the honour of the home destroyed for ever. The Rislers had just bought a country house at Asnières, the ex-residence of an actress, and had there installed themselves in sumptuous style. They had horses, carriages, and every luxury, and lived at such a rate! That which above all rendered honest Sigismond uneasy was the restraint of young Fromont. For some time past he had hardly drawn any money from the cashier, and yet Sidonie was spending more than ever.

"I have no confidence," said the unhappy cashier, shaking his head, "I have no confidence." Then, lowering his voice, he added:—

"But your brother, my dear Frank, your brother? How are we to explain his indifference? He goes about amongst all this looking at vacancy, his hands in his pockets, his mind taken up with his famous invention, which unfortunately does not seem in much of a hurry to come to anything. You don't mind my saying so? but he's either a rogue or a fool."

Whilst speaking thus they were pacing up and down the little garden, now halting, now resuming their walk. Frank felt as if it were all an evil dream. The rapidity of the journey, the sudden change of climate and locality, the incessant flow of

Sigismond's words, the new opinion that he was forced to form of Risler and Sidonie—that Sidonie whom he had so dearly loved—all these things stunned and bewildered him.

It was late. Night was coming on. Sigismond offered him a bed at Montrouge; he refused, alleging his fatigue, and remaining alone in the Marais. At that sad and ambiguous hour when day is closing and the gas is not yet lit, he paced mechanically towards his old dwelling in the Rue de Braque.

At the doorway, a bill was hanging :—"A room to let for a single man."

It was the very same room in which he had lived so long with his brother. He recognised the map fixed to the wall with four pins, the landing window and the little door plate of the Delobelles, "Birds and Insects for Milliners." The door of these ladies was ajar, he had only to push it to enter.

Certainly there was not in all Paris a surer refuge for him, a corner better suited to welcome and calm his troubled spirit, than this industrious and unchanging household. In the present agitation of his unhinged existence, it was like the port with its deep, tranquil waters, its quay bathed in sunlight and peace, where the women work awaiting the return of their husbands and fathers whilst the wind roars and the sea rages. There was here above all, without his really taking count of it, an intertwining of true affections, and that sweet miracle of tenderness which renders the love that is felt for us precious, even when we do not love in return.

That dear little icicle of a Désirée loved him so. Her eyes brightened up even when speaking to him of indifferent matters. Just as objects dipped in phosphorus all shine alike, so the slightest words she said lit up her beaming countenance. What a sweet repose this was to him after Sigismond's harsh utterances!

They both talked with animation whilst Mamma Delobelle was laying the dinner-table.

"You will dine with us, will you not, Monsieur Frank? Papa has gone to take the work back, but he will certainly be home to dinner!"

"He will certainly be home to dinner." The good woman said this with a certain pride.

In fact, since the mishap of his lesseeship the illustrious Delobelle no longer dined abroad, even on those evenings when he went to draw the week's money. The unfortunate lessee had

partaken of so many meals on credit at his restaurant that he no longer dared return there. To make up for this he never failed on Saturdays to bring home with him two or three hungry and unexpected guests, old comrades, "down in their luck." Thus on the present occasion he made his appearance escorted by a "first old man," from the Metz theatre, and a "low comedian," from the Augers theatre, both out of an engagement.

The low comedian, clean shaven, wrinkled, shrivelled-up by the glare of the foot-lights, resembled an aged street Arab; the first old man wore slippers without the slightest appearance of linen. Delobelle announced them pompously from the doorway, but the sight of Frank Risler interrupted the presentation.

"Frank! my Frank!" cried the old stroller in melodramatic tones, pawing the air convulsively with his hands; then, after a long and emphatic embrace, he presented his guests to one another:

"Monsieur Robricart of the Metz theatre,—Monsieur Chandlerzon of the Augers theatre,—Frank Risler, engineer." • In Dellobelle's mouth the word engineer assumed proportions!

Désirée pouted prettily at the sight of her father's friends. It would have been so nice to have had just a family party on a day like this. But the great man took no account of that. He had enough to do to empty his pockets. First he drew forth a superb raised pie, "for the ladies," he said, forgetting his own adoration for it. Next appeared a lobster, then an Arles sausage, some sweatmeats and cherries—the first of the season.

Whilst the enraptured first old man feigned to pull up an invisible shirt collar, and the low comedian grunted "gnouf, gnouf," with a gesture forgotten by Parisians for ten years past, Désirée thought with terror of the hole that this improvised repast would make in the week's scanty revenue: and Mamma Delobelle, all in a bustle, rummaged the whole of the sideboard to find enough spoons and forks. *

The meal was a gay one. The two actors stuffed themselves to the great joy of Delobelle, who kept turning over old recollections of the boards with them. Nothing could be more mournful. Fancy fragments of wings, extinguished floats, a room full of old properties mouldy and falling to pieces.

In a kind of familiar, trivial, dear-boyish slang they reminded one another of their innumerable successes; for all three,

according to their own account, had been acclaimed, laden with wreaths, borne in triumph by entire towns.

And whilst they spoke they eat as actors eat, sitting sideways at the table, their faces towards the public, with the feigned hurry of theatrical guests in presence of a pasteboard supper, alternating words and mouthfuls, making "business" out of the putting down of a glass or the drawing to of a chair, of expressing interest, astonishment, joy, alarm, surprise by the help of a knife and fork skilfully wielded. Mamma Delobelle listened to them smilingly. One is not an actor's wife for thirty years without growing somewhat accustomed to these singular ways.

But a little corner of the table was separated from the rest of the guests as by a cloud, which intercepted the silly jokes, the loud laughs, the boastings. Frank and Désirée talked in low tones, without hearing anything of what was being said around them. Incidents of their childhood, anecdotes of the neighbourhood, the whole of a vague past only valuable from the community of recollections evoked, from the same spark lighting their eyes, formed the staple of their pleasant chat.

Suddenly the cloud was rent asunder, and Delobelle's terrible voice interrupted the dialogue :

"You have not seen your brother, then?" said he to Frank, in order not to seem to be neglecting him too much; "nor yet his wife? Ah! you will find a fine lady there. Dresses, my dear boy, and a style, I can tell you! They have a real château at Asnières. The Chèbes are down there, too—Ah! all those people have all risen above us, old fellow. They are rich, they despise old friends—Never a word, never a visit—As for myself, you understand, I don't care a bit; but it is really insulting towards these ladies—"

"Oh! papa," said Désirée quickly, "You know that we are too fond of Sidonie to feel angry with her."

The actor dealt the table a furious blow with his fist, saying, "You are very wrong there, one ought to feel angry with persons who only seek to wound and to humiliate one."

He had still at heart the refusal of funds for his theatrical project and did not hide his rancour. "If you only knew," said he to Frank, "if you only knew the waste that is going on there. It is a pity. And nothing solid, nothing intelligent. I who speak to you, asked your brother for a little sum to ensure my future and bring him in considerable profit, and he refused

me point blank. Of course, Madame is so exacting. She rides on horseback, she goes to the races in her carriage, and rattles her husband along at the same rate as her little pony chaise on the quay at Asnières. Between ourselves I don't fancy poor Risler is very happy, that little woman tells him a lot of lies."

The old actor ended his tirade by a wink towards the low comedian and the first old man, and for a while there was between them an exchange of conventional airs and grimaces "he! he! hum! hum!" all the pantomime of asides.

Frank was overcome. Against his will, the horrible certainty was forced upon him from every side. Sigismond had spoken after his manner, Delobelle after his. The result was the same.

Happily dinner was over. The three actors rose from table to seek the brasserie in the Rue Blondel; Frank remained with the two women.

Seeing him thus mild and affectionate and so near her, Désirée all at once felt a great sense of gratitude towards Sidonie. She said to herself that after all it was to the latter's generosity she owed this seeming happiness, and the thought gave her courage to defend her old friend.

"You see, Monsieur Frank, you must not believe all my father said about your sister-in-law. He always exaggerates a little, does dear papa. For my part, I know that Sidonie is incapable of all the evil she is accused of, I am sure her heart is the same and that she still loves her old friends, though perhaps she neglects them a little. It is life, that. One is separated against one's will; is it not so, Monsieur Frank?"

Oh! how pretty he thought her while speaking thus. Never before had he noticed so closely her fine features, her aristocratic complexion, and when he left that evening, touched by the eagerness with which she had defended Sidonie, by all the charming feminine excuses she made for the silence and neglect of her friend, Frank Risler thought with an egotistic and naive sensation of pleasure, that this child had loved him, that she perhaps loved him still, and kept for him at the bottom of her heart that warm and sheltered corner, to which one returns as to a refuge from life's wounds.

All the night in his old room, lulled by the motion of his journey, and by that sound of wind and waves which succeeds long voyages, he dreamed of the days of his youth, of the little Chêbe, of Désirée, of their games and their labours, of the Ecole

Central, the great buildings of which were slumbering near him in the dark street of the Marais.

When morning came and the light falling through the curtainless windows tormented his eyes, he dreamed it was time to go to the college, and that his brother, before starting for the factory, was crying out, "Come, sluggard, come."

That good and loving voice, too loving, too real for a dream, made him open his eyes completely. Risler was standing by the bed watching his awakening with a pleasant smile, a little agitated; and in proof that it was really Risler, the latter in his joy at seeing his brother Frank could find nothing better to say than:

"I am so happy. I am so happy."

Although it was Sunday, Risler, according to his usual habit, had come to the factory to profit by the silence and tranquillity to work at his invention. The moment he made his appearance, old Achille had informed him that his brother Frank had arrived at the Rue de Braque, and he hurried there, joyful, surprised, and a little vexed that he had not been informed beforehand, and especially that Frank had deprived him of the first evening of his return. This regret recurred every instant as he talked by fits and starts, all he had to say remaining unsaid, interrupted by a thousand different questions and expressions of tenderness and joy. Frank excused himself on the plea of fatigue, and the pleasure he had at being once more in the old house.

"That is good! that is good!" said Risler, "but now I shan't let you go. You must come to Asnières at once. I shall give myself a holiday for to-day. You understand there's no more work from the moment you return. Sidonie will be surprised and pleased. We have so often spoken of you. What happiness! what happiness!"

The poor man expanded with joy and grew talkative, he, so silent, admired his Frank, found that he had grown. Yet the pupil of the Ecole Central was already of a good height when he departed, only his features were more marked now, his shoulders broader, and there was a wide difference between the tall student-like youth who had started two years previously for Ismalia and this handsome corsair, swarthy, serious, and gentle.

While Risler looked at him, Frank, on his side, observed his brother very attentively, and finding him just the same as ever, as simple, as tender, as absent-minded at times, he said to him-

self, "No! it is not possible. He has not ceased to be an honest man." Then thinking of what people dared to suppose, all his anger turned against the wife, the vicious hypocrite who deceived her husband so impudently, with such impunity that she had succeeded in making him pass for her accomplice. What a terrible explanation he would have with her! How severely he would speak to her—

"I forbid you, Madame, you hear me, I forbid you to dishonour my brother!"

He thought of this all the way, while observing the yet slender trees flit past in succession along the borders of the Saint Germain railway. Seated opposite to him Risler chattered without stopping. He spoke of the factory, of their business. They had gained forty thousand francs each during the past year, but it would be a very different thing when the printing machine was finished. A rotatory machine, my dear Frank, rotatory and dodecagonal, which will be able with a single turn of the cylinder to print off a pattern in twelve or fifteen colours, red over rose, dark green over pale green, without confusion, without mixing, without one touch injuring its neighbour, without one shade spoiling or blotting another—Do you understand?—A machine that will be an artist, like a man—It is a revolution in the printing of wall-papers."

"But," asked Frank a little uneasily, "have you invented your machine, or are you still in quest of it?"

"Invented? doubly and trebly invented it! To-morrow I will show you all my plans. I have also invented an automatic elevator to carry the papers to the drying rails. Next week I shall instal myself at the very top of the factory in the garret, and there have my first machine made, secretly, under my own eyes. In three months the patents will have to be taken out, and the printing machine will be at work. You will see, dear Frank, it will be a fortune for all of us—You may guess whether I shall not be happy to repay the Fromonts some little of what they have done for me—Ah! yes. Truly God has been very good to me, in my life."

Thereupon he began to enumerate all his blessings. Sidonie was the best of all creatures, a love of a little wife, who did him much honour. They had a charming house. They received society, very good society. Sidonie sang like a nightingale, thanks to the expressive method of Madame Dobson. There was another good creature, this Madame Dobson. One thing

alone troubled this poor Risler, and that was the incomprehensible quarrel with Sigismond. Perhaps Frank could help him to clear up his mystery.

"Oh! yes, I will help you, brother," quoth Frank with clenched teeth, and his brow flushed with anger at the idea that any one could have suspected this frank and loyal nature that opened itself thus spontaneously and artlessly. Happily he had come, he the avenger, and he would put everything right.

Meanwhile they drew near the house at Asnières. Frank had already observed from a distance the fanciful stair-case turret, all shining with new blue slates. The house appeared to him to have been built expressly for Sidonie, to be the true cage for such a capricious and gaudy plumaged bird. It was a two storied chalet, the glistening windows and rose-lined curtains of which could be seen from the railway, beyond a green lawn, where there hung suspended an enormous silvered ball.

The river ran hard by, encumbered with chains, with bathing establishments and boats, the slightest wave rocking the crowd of tiny wherries with their freshly painted pretentious names powdered with blacks from the neighbouring chimnies, that were moved to the wharf. From her windows Sidonie could see the water-side restaurants, silent during the week, but crowded on Sundays with a motley, noisy host whose gaieties mingled with the heavy stroke of oars, and started from both banks to increase that flow of uproar, cries, songs and laughter which on fête days ebbs and flows interruptedly over ten leagues of the Seine.

During the week one saw people loosely dressed, idle, loafing men in large peaked straw hats and woollen jerseys, women seating themselves on the worn grass of the slopes, inactive, with the dreamy eyes of grazing cows. All the itinerants, organ-grinders, harpists, and mountebanks halted there. The quay was encumbered with them, the windows of the little houses that bordered it were always thrown open at their approach, and heads with disordered hair, ill-fastened dressing-gowns, and lounging smokers eagerly watched these trivialities as souvenirs of neighbouring Paris. Altogether it was a sad and ugly sight.

The scarcely sprouted grass had been worn yellow by traffic. The dust was positively black, and yet every Thursday all the swell cocottes passed by, bound for the casino, at the full speed of their fragile wheels and hired postillions. All this pleased that thorough Parisienne, Sidonie. During her childhood, little Chébe

had often heard Asnières spoken of by the illustrious Delobelle, who, like so many other actors, longed to have in these regions a little house, a country box, to which one returns by the half-past twelve train when the theatre is over. Sidonie Risler realised all the dreams of little Chèbe.

The two brothers reached the garden-gate opening on to the river, and the key of which was usually left in the lock. They entered, traversing some clusters of young shrubs. Here a billiard saloon, there the gardener's cottage, or a little glazed greenhouse appeared like portions of those tiny Swiss chalets which are given to children to play with. All were very light looking, hardly fixed in the soil, and ready to fly at the slightest breeze of bankruptcy or caprice. It was the villa of a cocotte or a stock-jobber.

Frank looked around him a little dazzled. In the background the windows of the drawing-room opened on to a little stone terrace surrounded with flower vases. An American rocking chair, some folding chairs and a small table on which coffee was already served, were grouped around the doorway. Inside one heard the sound of a piano and the faint murmur of voices.

"Sidonie will be astonished," said the good Risler, walking softly over the gravel, "she does not expect me before this evening. At this moment she is singing with Madame Dobson."

Suddenly pushing open the door he called out from the threshold in his loud good-natured voice, before entering, "Guess who I am bringing!"

Madame Dobson seated alone before the piano made a bound on her stool, while at the other end of the long drawing-room, from behind the exotic plants that towered above a table whose slender outlines they appeared to form a continuation of, George Fromont and Sidonie rose precipitately.

"Ah! how you frightened me!" cried she, running to Risler.

The flounce of her white dress, with its trimming of blue ribbon resembling strips of sky between opaque white clouds, rustled over the carpet, as, already free from all embarrassment, she came direct with an amiable air and the eternal little smile to embrace her husband, and offered her forehead to Frank saying, "Good day, brother."

Risler left them opposite each other, and approached young Fromont, whom he was greatly astonished to find there.

"What, Chorche, you here! I thought you were at Savigny."

"Yes, but only fancy—I came—I thought—I thought you stayed at Asnières on Sunday—I wished to speak to you about an affair—"

Rapidly, perplexed in his phrases, he commenced talking of an important order. Sidonie, after exchanging a few indifferent words with Frank, had disappeared. Madame Dobson was continuing her tremolos in a low key, like those that accompany critical situations at the theatre. In truth here was a situation, high pitched enough, only Risler's good humour chased away all constraint. He made excuses to his partner for not having been at home, and then proposed to show Frank over the house. They went from the drawing-room to the stables, from the stables to the coach-house and the greenhouses. All was new, bright, shining, small and inconvenient. "But," remarked Risler with a certain pride, "it has cost a great deal of money."

He was determined to make Frank admire this acquisition of Sidonie's in its least details, pointing out the gas and water laid on every floor, the electric bells, the garden furniture, the English billiard table, the baths—all with a transparent gratitude addressed to young Fromont, who, by making him partner in the house, had positively put a fortune in his hands.

At each fresh outburst from Risler, George shrank back ashamed and confused under Frank's singular gaze.

The breakfast lacked life. Madame Dobson, delighted to breathe in full romantic intrigue, was almost the only speaker. Knowing, or rather believing she knew, the whole story of her friend, she understood the dull anger of Frank, an old lover furious to see his place filled by another: the inquietude of George, troubled by the appearance of a rival. She encouraged the one with a glance, controlled the other with a smile, admired the calmness of Sidonie, and reserved all her contempt for that abominable Risler, the coarse and ferocious tyrant.

As soon as breakfast was over, young Fromont said he must return to Savigny. Risler did not dare detain him, thinking that his dear Madame George would pass her Sunday alone, so without having been able to say a single word to his mistress, the lover went away in the full sunlight to take an afternoon train, escorted by the husband, who persisted in conducting him to the station.

Madame Dobson sat for some time with Frank and Sidonie beneath an arbour starred with the rosy-tinted buds of a sprouting-vine, but perceiving that her presence was irksome to

them, she re-entered the drawing-room, and, as before, when George was there, began to play softly and expressively. In the silent garden the dulcet sounds, gliding through the branches, seemed like the cooing of birds before a storm.

At last they were alone.

Under the lattice work of the arbour, still bare of leaves, the sun of May was too hot. Sidonie shaded her eyes with her hand, gazing at the passers-by on the quay; Frank also looked away, but on the other side. Suddenly, seemingly independent of each other, both of them turned at the same instant from conformity of thought and action.

"I wish to speak to you," said he, just as she was opening her mouth.

"I also want to speak to you," replied she in a grave manner; "but come this way, it will be better." And they entered a little pavilion at the end of the garden together.

CHAPTER II.

AN EXPLANATION.

IN truth, it was time the avenger declared himself.

In the maelstrom of Parisian life this little woman was whirling desperately. Upheld simply by her lightness, she still kept afloat; but her extravagant expenditure, the luxury she exhibited, the contempt she more and more showed for the slightest propriety, all announced that she would soon sink, dragging with her the honour of her husband, and perhaps the fortune and name of a considerable house ruined by her insanities.

The neighbourhood where she now lived was further hastening her ruin. At Paris, in those quarters of petty tradesmen, which are as full of gossip and scandal as little provincial towns, she was compelled to be careful; but in her house at Asnières, surrounded by actresses' chalets, by dubious households, by linen drapers' assistants out for a holiday, she no longer restrained herself. All around her was an atmosphere of vice which agreed with her, and which she breathed without disgust.

A pistol shot fired in an adjacent house one night, which informed the whole neighbourhood of a common, stupid intrigue, made her dream of similar things. She also wanted to have "adventures."

No longer observing any moderation in her language or in her dress, on days when she did not walk on the quay at Asnières dressed in a short skirt with a tall cane in her hand, like an elegante of Trouville or Houlgate, she remained at home in her dressing-gown like her neighbours, absolutely inactive, hardly occupying herself in her house, where she was robed like a "cocotte" without suspecting anything of it. The same woman that one saw on horseback every morning, remained whole hours talking to her maid of the strange households surrounding them.

Little by little, she returned to her old level, and even sank below it. From the rich well-placed middle class to which her marriage had raised her, she had fallen to the grade of those who are scorned by the world. Through continually travelling in railway-carriages, in the company of girls fantastically dressed, their hair falling over their eyes like a dog's, or floating down their backs *à la Geneviève de Brabant*, she ended by resembling them. She turned herself into a blonde for two months, to the great amazement of Risler. As for George, all these eccentricities amused him, made him find ten women in the same one. It was he who was the real husband, the master of the house.

To gratify Sidonie he had procured her a semblance of society, his young bachelor friends, several fast business men, hardly any women: women have too sharp eyes. Her only lady friend was Madame Dobson. They gave grand dinners, had boating excursions and fireworks. Every day the situation of poor Risler became more ridiculous, more and more shocking. When he came home in the evening tired out and ill-dressed, he was compelled to hurry up to his room to make something of a toilette.

"We have some people to dinner," his wife would say, "make haste."

He would take his seat last at table after shaking hands with his guests, friends of young Fromont, whose names he hardly knew. Singularly enough the affairs of the factory were often touched on at this table to which George brought his club acquaintances with the calm assurance of the man who pays for all.

"Breakfasts and dinners on business!" In the eyes of Risler this explained everything, the constant presence of his partner, the choice of the guests, and the marvellous dresses of Sidonie who made herself beautiful and coquettish in the interests of the firm. But this coquettishness of his mistress plunged young Fromont into despair. Every hour of the day he came to surprise her, uneasy, suspicious, fearful of leaving her deceitful and perverted nature to itself for any length of time.

"What has become of your husband," old Gardinois would ask his granddaughter in a bantering tone, "why doesn't he come oftener?"

Clara made excuses for George, but this constant abandonment began to render her uneasy. She wept now on receiving those little scraps of notes, those telegrams, that arrived daily, at dinner-time. "Do not expect me, dear, this evening, I cannot get to Savigny until to-morrow or the day after by the night train!"

She ate sorrowfully opposite the empty place, and without knowing she was betrayed she felt that her husband was drifting apart from her. He was so abstracted when any family gathering or other circumstance compelled him to remain at the house, so mute about his occupations. Clara having now only very distant relations with Sidonie knew nothing of what was going on at Asnières, but when George quitted her hurriedly and smiling, she tormented herself in her loneliness with unavowed suspicions. Like all those who await some great sorrow she felt an immense void in her heart, a place ready as it were for the catastrophe.

Her husband was hardly happier than she was. That cruel Sidonie appeared to take pleasure in tormenting him. She allowed all the world to pay court to her. At that time a certain Cazabon calling himself Cazaboni, an Italian tenor from Toulouse, introduced by Madame Dobson, came every day to sing disquieting duets. George, very jealous, ran down to Asnières in the afternoon, neglected everything, and already began to find Risler did not look sufficiently after his wife. He would have him blind only so far as he himself was concerned.

Ah! if he had only married her, how he would have looked after her, but he had no right over her, and she did not hesitate to tell him so. Sometimes too he reasoned with that invincible logic which often gleams in the minds of even the most stupid,

that being himself a deceiver he deserved to be deceived. Taken altogether his was a wretched life. He passed his time in calling on jewellers and silk mercers, in inventing presents and surprises for Sidonie. He knew her well. He knew he could amuse her with gew-gaws, but not retain her, and that the day she began to be weary—

But Sidonie was not weary yet. She had the existence which she desired, all the happiness she was capable of realising. Her love affair with George had in it nothing inflammatory or romantic. He was simply a second husband, younger, and above all, richer than the other. To throw a veil of decorum as it were over her crime, she had brought her parents to Aisnières and placed them in a cottage at the further end of the village; and this vain and voluntarily blind father, this tender and ever dazzled mother, lent her a surrounding of respectability of which she felt the need as she became the more lost.

All had been well arranged in that little perverse head which reasoned so coldly about vice, and it seemed as though her life would continue thus tranquilly when suddenly Frank Risler arrived. The moment she saw him enter she felt her repose threatened, and that something very serious was about to happen between them.

In an instant her plan was formed; the question now was to put it into action.

The pavilion they had entered, a large circular apartment, the four windows of which commanded different views, was furnished for the summer siestas, for those hot days when one seeks a refuge from the sun and from the buzzing insects in the garden. A large and very low divan extended all round, and a little lacquered table, likewise very low and covered with odd numbers of fashionable periodicals, stood in the middle of the room. The chintz hangings were bright, and their pattern—a design of birds flying amid bluish reeds—had the effect of a dream of summer, a light fancy floating before the closed eyes. The lowered blinds, the matting spread over the floor, the virginia creeper twined outside all along the lattice-work, fostered a refreshing coolness which was increased by the neighbouring sound of the flowing river, and the splashing of its wavelets against the shore.

Sidonie on entering sat down, throwing back her long white skirt which spread like a fall of snow below the divan, and with bright eyes, smiling mouth and her little head—whose side bow .

still more increased her air of capricious impertinence—slightly bent, she waited.

Frank, very pale, remained standing looking around him. After a moment he said: "I compliment you, Madame, you evidently understand what is comfortable."

Then suddenly as if he feared that beginning in this fashion the conversation would not arrive quickly enough at the point he wished to bring it, he added roughly, "To whom do you owe all this luxury; is it to your husband or to your lover?"

Without moving from the divan, without even lifting her eyes towards him, she replied, "To both."

He was slightly disconcerted by so much self-possession. "You admit then that this man is your lover."

"Why, of course!"

Frank looked at her for a moment without speaking; she had also turned pale in spite of her calmness, and the eternal little smile no longer fluttered at the corner of her mouth.

"Listen to me, Sidonie," he said. "The name of my brother, the name he has given to his wife, is also my name. Since Risler is silly enough, blind enough, to let it be dishonoured by you it is my lot to defend it from your injuries. So I must ask you to warn M. Fromont that he will have to change his mistress as quickly as possible, and that he may go and ruin himself elsewhere. If not—"

"If not?" queried Sidonie, who all the time he was speaking had not ceased to play with her rings.

"If not, I shall inform my brother of what is taking place at his home, and you will be surprised at the Risler whom you will then know, as formidable and violent as he is ordinarily inoffensive. My revelation may perhaps kill him, but you may be sure he will kill you first."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Eh! let him kill me. What does it matter to me?"

She said this with an air so affecting, so regardless of everything, that Frank in spite of himself felt a little pity for this beautiful creature, young, happy, who spoke of death with such self-abandonment.

"You love him then," said he to her in a voice already vaguely softened, "you love this Fromont so much that you would rather die than renounce him."

She drew herself up quickly. *I? I love that dandy, that*

dummy, that silly girl dressed like a man? I took him as I would have taken any one else—”

“Why?”

“Because I was obliged, because I was mad, because in my heart I had and still have a love I would tear out, no matter at what cost.”

She had risen, and spoke with her eyes fixed on his eyes, her mouth close to his, and trembling in every limb.

Another love! Whom did she love then? Frank feared to ask her. Without yet suspecting anything he felt that this look, this whisper close to him, were about to reveal something terrible. But his office of avenger obliged him to know all. “Who is it?” he asked.

She replied in a low voice: “You know very well it is yourself.”

She was his brother’s wife. For two years he had never thought of her but as a sister. For him the wife of his brother no longer resembled in anything his old love, and it would have been a crime to have recognised in a single feature of her face one to whom in the old days he had so often said, “I love you.” And now it was she who declared that she loved him. The unfortunate avenger stood awed, stupefied, and could not find a single word to reply. She, facing him, waited.

It was one of those spring days full of fever and sunlight to which the moisture of former rains imparts a strange and melancholy softness. The air was mild and perfumed with fresh flowers which on this first warm day emitted a strong odour like violets in a muff. Through its high, half-open windows, the room they were in inhaled all this mingling of perfumes. Outside were heard the organs in the churches, distant calls on the river, and nearer, in the garden, the languishing and amorous voice of Madame Dobson who was sighing out,

“On dit que tu te maries ;
Tu sais que j'en puis mourir !”

“Yes; Frank,” said Sidonio, “I have always loved you. This love which I formerly renounced because I was a young girl, and young girls don’t know what they do—this love nothing has been able to efface or lessen. When I learned that Désirée loved you too—she so unfortunate, so disinherited by nature—from a great impulse of generosity I tried to secure the happiness of her life by sacrificing my own, and all at once I

repulsed you in order that you should go to her. Ah ! but when you were far away I understood that the sacrifice was beyond my strength. Poor little Désirée ! have I not cursed her from the bottom of my heart. Will you believe it ? From that time I have avoided seeing her, meeting her. The sight of her gave me too much pain."

"But if you loved me," asked Frank in a low tone, "if you loved me, why did you marry my brother?"

She did not blanch: "To marry Risler was to bring myself closer to you. I said to myself, 'I cannot be his wife. Well, I will become his sister. At least, I shall then be permitted to love him still, and we shall not pass all our lives as strangers to each other.' Alas ! such are the artless dreams one has at twenty, and which experience quickly shows us the emptiness of. I have not been able to love you as a sister, Frank, I have not been able to forget you either ; my marriage has prevented this. With another husband it might have happened, but with Risler it was terrible. He was always speaking of you, of your success, of your future, 'Frank said this, Frank did that.' He loves you so much, poor fellow. And to make it worse for me your brother is so like you. In your walk, and in your features there is a family resemblance, and in your voices especially. Often I have closed my eyes under his caresses, saying to myself, 'It is he. It is Frank.' When I found this love was becoming a torment, a demoniacal possession, I tried to stupefy myself. I consented to listen to George who had long pursued me, to change my life, to make it noisy, excited, but I swear to you, Frank, amid the whirl of pleasure in which I was carried away I never ceased to think of you, and if any one had the right to come here and demand an account of my conduct it most certainly was not you, who, without intending it, have made me what I am."

She ceased speaking. Frank dared not lift his eyes to her. For a moment or so past, he had found her too beautiful, too desirable. She was his brother's wife. Neither dared he speak. The unhappy man felt that the old passion was re-installing itself despotically in his heart, and that, henceforth, looks, words, all that proceeded from him would be love. And she was his brother's wife !

"Ah ! how unhappy, how unhappy we are !" cried the poor avenger, sinking beside her on the divan.

These few words were of themselves an act of cowardice, the

commencement of a giving way, as if destiny, showing itself so cruel, had deprived him of the strength to defend himself. Sidonie had placed her hand upon his—"Frank—Frank," and they remained there side by side, silent and impassioned, lulled by the song of Madame Dobson that came fitfully through the trees :

"Ton amour c'est ma folie,
Hélas ! je n'en puis gueri-i-i-r !"

All at once, the tall form of Risler appeared in the doorway. "This way, Chèbe, this way. They are in the pavilion."

At the same moment the good man entered, escorted by his father and mother-in-law, whom he had gone to find. There was a moment of effusion and innumerable embraces. You should have seen with what a protective air M. Chèbe examined the tall young man who stood a head and shoulders above him. "Well, my boy, does it go on as you wish, this Suez canal?"

Madame Chèbe, for whom Frank always remained something of a future son-in-law, embraced him, while Risler, awkward as usual in his gaieties and moments of expansion, gesticulated on the doorstep, talked of killing several fatted calves for the returned prodigal, and with a powerful voice that resounded through the neighbouring gardens, cried to the singing mistress : "Madame Dobson, Madame Dobson, excuse me, but that is too sad a song. Away with melancholy for to-day ! Play us something gay, something we can dance to, that I can waltz to with Madame Chèbe."

"Risler ! are you mad ? my son !"

"Come, come ! mamma, you must !—hop !"

Heavily round the garden walks they swung in an automatic waltz of six steps, a regular Vaucanson waltz, the mother-in-law out of breath, stopping at every step to put the unfastened strings of her bonnet in order, and adjust the lace of her shawl, the elegant shawl of Sidonie's wedding-day. He was intoxicated with joy, poor Risler.

For Frank, this was a long and memorable day of anguish. The drive, the row on the river, the lunch on the grass on the Ile des Ravageurs—they spared him none of the beauties of Asnières ; and all the time, in the full sunlight of the road, or the reflection of the waves, he had to laugh, to chat, to relate his voyage, to speak of the isthmus of Suez and of the works undertaken there, to listen to the secret complaints of M. Chèbe, always furious against his children, to his brother's details

about the printing machine. "Rotative, my dear Frank, rotative and dodecagonal!" Sidonie let the men talk among themselves and seemed absorbed in profound meditation. From time to time she bestowed a word or a sad smile on Madame Dobson, and Frank, without daring to look at her fully, followed all the movements of her blue-lined parasol, or the shifting folds of her dress.

How she had changed in two years! how beautiful she had grown! he mused to himself. Then he had horrible thoughts. There were races at Longchamps that day. Carriages driven by women with painted faces in tightly drawn veils, passed by theirs, grazed it. Motionless on their seats, they held their long whips erect with the stiffness of dolls, nothing about them appeared living but their blackened eyes fixed on their horses' heads. As they passed people turned; all eyes followed them, as if drawn into the vortex of their track. Sidonie resembled these creatures. She herself could have driven George's carriage thus, for it was George's carriage that Frank was in. He had also drunk George's wine. All the luxury they were sharing together came from George; it was shameful, revolting. He longed to proclaim it to his brother; it was his duty. He had come expressly for the purpose; but he felt he had no longer the courage. Ah! the unhappy avenger.

In the evening after dinner, with the drawing-room window open to the fresh air from the river, Risler begged his wife to sing. He wished her to show Frank all her new accomplishments. Leaning by the piano, Sidonie excused herself with a sad air, while Madame Dobson ran through a prelude shaking her long curls.

"But I know nothing. What shall I sing you?" she asked.

At last she decided. Pale, undeceived, apart from things, by the trembling light of the candles which seemed to be burning perfumes, so much did the lilacs and hyacinths scent the air, she began a Creole song the words and music of which Madame Dobson had herself written out:

"Pauv' pitit mam'zelle Zizi,
C'est l'amou, l'amou qui tourne la tête à li."

And in relating the history of this unhappy little Zizi who went mad for love Sidonie had the air of being love-sick herself. With what heart-rending expression, what cry of a wounded

dove, she repeated the refrain so melancholy and sweet to hear in the childish patois of the Creoles :

"C'est l'amou, l'amou qui tourne la tête à li."

It was enough to make him mad, too, the unhappy avenger.

Ah, well, no ! The siren had ill chosen her song ! At the very name of Zizi, Frank was in thought transported suddenly to a sad little chamber in the Marais, far from Sidonie's drawing-room, and the pity of his heart called up the image of that little Désirée Delobelle who had loved him so long. Until she was fifteen she had had no other name than Zirée or Zizi, and she was indeed the "pauv'-pinit Zizi" of the Creole song, the deserted and still faithful lover. The other sang in vain now. Frank no longer heard nor saw her. He was away beside the great arm-chair, on the little low chair where he had so often sat waiting for the father. Yes, his salvation was there, nowhere but there. He must take refuge in the love of this child, throw himself headlong into it, say to her : "Take me, save me !" And who knows ? She loved him so much. Perhaps she would save him, cure him of his guilty passion.

"Where are you going ?" asked Risler, as he saw his brother rise suddenly as the last flourish ended.

"I must be off ; it is late."

"What ! are you not going to sleep here ? But your room is ready."

"Quite ready," repeated Sidonie with a singular look.

He excused himself earnestly. His presence in Paris was indispensable for certain important commissions with which the company had entrusted him. They tried again to detain him, but he was already in the ante-chamber, and crossing the moon-lit garden he ran amongst all the uproar of Asnière to the station.

When he had gone, Risler went to his room, Sidonie and Madame Dobson lingered by the drawing-room window. The music from the neighbouring casino reached them with the "Yo ! Ho !" of the oarsmen, and the sound of ancing, dull and rhythmic like a tambourine.

"There's a trouble-feast for you !" said Madame Dobson.

"Oh ! I have checkmated him," answered Sidonie, "only I must take care, I shall be closely watched now. He is so jealous. I must write to Cazaboni not to come here for some time ; and to-morrow morning you must tell George to go for a fortnight to Savigny."

CHAPTER III.

PAUV' PITIT MAM'ZELLE ZIZI.

OH ! how happy Désirée was.

Frank came every day and sat at her feet on the little low chair as in the good old days, and it was no longer to talk to her of Sidonie. In the morning when she began work, she would see the door open gently : "Good-morning, Mam'selle Zizi !" He always called her so now, by her little girl's name : and if you only knew how nicely he said, "Good-morning, Mam'selle Zizi !"

In the evening they waited for the "father" together, and while she worked he would make her tremble at the recital of his travels.

"What's the matter with you ? You are not the same," said Madame Delobelle, astonished to see her so gay, and especially so active. The fact is, that instead of resting as formerly, always plunged in her armchair, after the manner of a young grandmother, the little lame girl rose every instant, went to the window with a spring as if she were budding wings, practised standing up quite upright, asking her mother in a low voice : "Does *it* show when I don't walk ?" From the pretty little head, where hitherto in the arrangement of the head-dress, she had concentrated all her coquetry, this coquetry spread over all her person, like her long fine curly hair when she unfastened it. She was very, very coquettish now, and every one saw it plainly. The very birds and insects assumed a special little air of their own.

Oh, yes ! Désirée Delobelle was happy. For several days Frank had talked of their going into the country, and as her father, always so good, so generous, willingly consented to allow the ladies to take a day's holiday, all four of them set out together one Sunday morning.

You cannot imagine what a fine day that was. When Désirée opened her window at six o'clock, and saw, through the

morning mist, the sun already warm and bright, when she thought of the trees, the fields, the roads, of all that miraculous nature she had not seen for so long, and which she was about to see, on the arm of Frank, the tears started to her eyes. The bells ringing, the noises of Paris already rising from the pavement of the streets, Sunday—that fête-day of the poor—which clears everything, even the cheeks of little charcoal dealers, all the aurora of this exceptional morning was enjoyed by her deliciously and long.

The previous evening Frank had brought her a parasol, a little parasol with an ivory handle; and she had got ready a dress carefully made, but very simple, such as was suitable for a poor little cripple who wished to pass unnoticed. It is not sufficient to say that the poor little cripple was charming.

Exactly at nine o'clock, Frank came round in a carriage, engaged for the day, and ran upstairs for his guests. Mam'selle Zizi went down coquettishly all alone, leaning on the rail, without hesitation. Madame Delobelle followed, watching over her; and the illustrious actor, his paletot on his arm, sprang before with young Risler to open the carriage door. Oh! the pleasant drive, the beautiful country, the beautiful river, the beautiful trees.

Don't ask where they went; Désirée never knew. Only she will tell you the sun was brighter there than anywhere else, the birds more gay, the woods more shady; and she would tell no lie.

When quite little, she had once or twice spent days like this in the open air, and taken long country walks. But later, constant work, poverty, and the sedentary life so sweet to the infirm, had kept her, as it were, cooped up in the old quarter of Paris where she lived, and where the high roofs, the balconied windows, and the factory chimneys—their new red brick-work relieving sharply from the dark walls of historic mansions—made a horizon always the same, and always sufficient for her. For a long time she had known no other flowers than the convolvulus in her window, no other trees than the acacias of Fromont's factory, seen by glimpses through the smoke.

So what joy filled her heart when she found herself in the open country. Gay with all this pleasure and with her recovered youth, she passed from astonishment to astonishment, clapping her hands, uttering little bird-like cries; and the transports of her artless curiosity concealed the hesitation of her

gait. Positively, *it* was not much seen. Besides Frank was always there, ready to sustain her, to give her a hand in crossing the ditches, and so eager, and with such tender eyes. This marvellous day passed like a vision. The great blue sky showing mistily between the branches, the underwood spreading around the roots of the tall trees, sheltered and mysterious, where the flowers sprang higher and straighter, where the golden mosses seemed like rays of sunlight on the trunks of the oaks, the luminous surprise of the glades, all, even the fatigue of a day's walking in the open air, enraptured and charmed her.

Towards evening when at the border of the forest, she saw in the fading light the white roads stretching across the country, the river like a band of silver, and far away in the distance between two hills a mist of grey roofs, vanes and cupolas, that they told her was Paris, she carried away with a glance, in a corner of her memory, all this flowery landscape, perfumed with love and June hawthorn, as if she was never, never to see it again.

The bouquet that the little cripple brought back from this beautiful excursion scented her chamber for a week. Mingled in it, amongst hyacinths, violets and whitethorn, were a host of little nameless flowers, those flowers of the poor which spring from scattered seeds everywhere along the roadside.

In looking at these delicate corollas of pale blue or bright pink, at all the fine shades which the flowers invented long before the colourists, Désirée, many times during that week, retraced her excursion again. The violets reminded her of the little mound of moss where she had gathered them, seeking for them under the leaves, and grazing Frank's fingers with her own. The large water flowers had been plucked at the edge of a ditch still humid with the winter rains, and to reach them she had been obliged to cling tightly to Frank's arm. All these memories came to her while working. During this time, the sun entering by the open window made the feathers of the humming-birds glisten. The spring, youth, songs and perfumes transfigured this dull fifth floor work-room, and Désirée said seriously to Madame Delobelle, while smelling the bouquet of her lover: "Have you noticed, mamma, how sweet the flowers smell this year?"

Frank also began to feel the charm.

Little by little Mam'selle Zizi took possession of his heart,

and drove from it even the remembrance of Sidonie. It is true the poor avenger did all he could to bring this about. Every hour of the day he was near Désirée, and clung to her like a child. Not once had he dared to return to Asnières, as yet he was still too much afraid of the other.

"Come down, now and then, Sidonie wishes to see you," said the good Risler from time to time, when Frank called in to see him at the factory. But Frank stood firm and made a pretence of all kinds of business in order to put off his visit to another day. This was easy enough with Risler, who was more than ever absorbed in his machine which they had just begun to construct.

Every time Frank came down from his brother's room old Sigismond watched him pass and, in his long alpaca sleeves and with his pen and pen-knife in his hand, took a turn with him outside. He kept the young man well-informed of the state of affairs at the factory. For some days, things had appeared to be going on better. M. George came regularly to his office and returned every evening to Savigny. No more bills were presented to be paid. And it even appeared that Madame down there was also keeping more tranquil.

The cashier was triumphant. "You see, my boy," said he, "I did quite right in informing you. Your arrival was enough to put everything in order. All the same," added the good man carried away by habit, "all the same, I have no confidence."

"Do not be afraid, M. Sigismond, I am here," replied the avenger.

"You do not mean to leave yet awhile, do you, Frank?"

"No no, not yet awhile, I have a big affair to finish first."

"Ah! so much the better."

Frank's big affair was his marriage with Désirée, he had spoken to no one, not even to herself, but Mam'selle Zizi must have suspected something, for day by day she became gayer and prettier, as if she foresaw that the moment would soon come when she would have need of all her joy and all her charms.

They were alone in the workroom one Sunday afternoon. Madame Delobelle had gone out full of pride to show herself for once on the arm of her great man, and had left friend Frank with her daughter to keep her company. Carefully dressed, with a festive air about him, Frank wore this day a

singular expression of countenance at once timid and resolute, tender and solemn, and from nothing but the way in which the little low chair approached quite near to the great arm-chair, did the great arm-chair understand that it was about to have a very serious confidence imparted to it, and slightly suspected what it was. The conversation began with some indifferent phrases which were interrupted every instant by long silences, just as when travelling, one stops to take breath at every stage towards the end of the journey.

"It is a fine day."

"Oh! very fine."

"Our bouquet still smells nicely."

"Oh! very nicely."

And in merely pronouncing these simple words their voices were full of the emotion of what was coming.

At last the little low chair drew still closer to the great arm-chair; and the two children, their eyes meeting, their hands interlaced, called each other faintly, slowly, by their names: "Désirée," "Frank."

At that moment some one knocked at the door. It was the careful little knock of a hand finely gloved which feared to soil itself by the least contact.

"Come in!" said Désirée, with a quick movement of impatience, and Sidonie appeared, beautiful, coquettish, gracious, and fresh as the roses in her bosom. She had come to see her dear Zizi, to embrace her in passing. She had wished to do so such a long time. The presence of Frank appeared to astonish her greatly, though in her delight of talking with her old friend she hardly noticed him. After effusive outbursts and caresses and a long talk about the past, she wished to see the landing-window again and Risler's lodging. It amused her to live all her youth over again.

"Do you remember, Frank, when the Princess Colibri came in to your room, her little head erect under a diadem of feathers?"

Frank did not answer. His emotion was too great. Something told him it was for him, for him alone this woman had come, that she sought to drag him away to prevent his belonging to another, and the unhappy man perceived with terror that it would need no great effort on her part to do this. Simply on seeing her enter his whole heart had been recaptured.

Désirée suspected nothing. Sidonie wore so frank and friendly an air. And besides now they were brother and sister

love was no longer possible between them. But still the little cripple had a vague presentiment of misfortune when Sidonie, already at the door and ready to leave, turned negligently to say to her brother-in-law: "By-the-bye, Frank, Risler charged me to bring you back to dinner with us this evening. The carriage is below. We will take him up in passing the factory." Then with the prettiest smile in the world: "You will let him come, won't you, Zirée? Don't be uneasy, we will return him to you."

And he had the courage to go, the ungrateful one! He went without hesitation, without once looking back, borne on by his passion as by a furious sea, and not on that day, nor the following days, nor ever after did the great arm-chair of Mam'selle Zizi know what it was that the little low chair had so interesting to say to it.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WAITING-ROOM.

"Yes, I love you, I love you—more than ever, and for ever. What is the good of struggling and fighting? Our crime is stronger than we are. After all is it really a crime for us to love? We were destined one for the other. Have we not the right to reunite ourselves in spite of the life that has separated us? Come then. It is settled, we go. To-morrow evening at the Lyons Station at ten o'clock.—The tickets will be taken, and I shall expect you.

FRANK."

For a month Sidonie had been hoping for this letter; for a month, she had been trying every wile and ruse in order to lead her brother-in-law on to this explosion of passion in writing. It had cost her some trouble to obtain it. It was not easy to pervert a heart as honest and young as that of Frank to crime; and in this singular struggle—in which the one that truly loved fought against his own cause—she often felt at the end of her powers and almost discouraged.

So what a triumph it was for her when this letter was

brought to her one morning. Madame Dobson was there. She had just arrived charged with complaints from George who was weary away from his mistress, and was beginning to be uneasy about a brother-in-law more assiduous, more jealous and more exacting than a husband.

"Ah! the poor dear, the poor dear," said the sentimental American, "if you only saw how miserable he is."

And while adjusting her curls, she unfastened her roll of music and drew forth the letters of the poor dear which she had carefully hidden between the pages of her songs, delighted to be mixed up in this love affair, and to exalt herself into an atmosphere of intrigue and mystery which imparted a tender expression to her cold eyes and her dry blonde complexion. The strangest thing was that even whilst lending herself willingly to this interchange of love-letters, this young and pretty Madame Dobson had never either written or received a single one on her own account. Always passing between Paris and Asnières with a love message under her wing this singular carrier pigeon remained faithful to her mate and cooed for him alone.

When Sidonie showed her Frank's letter, Madame Dobson asked: "What shall you reply?"

"It's done! I have answered 'yes.'"

"What! do you mean to run away with that madman?"

Sidonie began to laugh: "No indeed! I answered 'yes,' to make him go and wait for me at the station: that's all. The least I can do for him is to give him a quarter of an hour of anxiety. He has made me wretched enough for the last month. To think that I have had to change my entire mode of living for the sake of this gentleman. I have been obliged to give up my receptions, to shut my doors in the face of my friends, of all that is young and agreeable, beginning with George and ending with you. For you know, my dear, you offended him too, and he would have liked me to dismiss you with the rest."

But Sidonie did not say that her strongest reason for hating Frank was that he had frightened her, frightened her very much, by threatening her with her husband. From that moment she had felt quite uneasy, and her life, that dear life she cherished so much, had appeared to her in serious danger. Those fair cold men like Risler have terrible fits of rage, white hot rage of which one cannot calculate the results, like

those explosive powders without taste or smell, that one fears to make use of, not knowing their power. Positively the idea that one day or other her husband might be informed of her conduct terrified her.

From her former poor existence in a populous quarter, she had preserved the recollection of broken homes, of husbands avenged, of blood washing out shame. Visions of death haunted her. And death, the eternal repose, the great silence, was well calculated to terrify this little being, hungry after pleasure, madly yearning for noise and motion.

This lucky letter put an end to all her terrors. Now it was impossible for Frank to denounce her, even in his fury of disappointment, knowing she had such a weapon in her hands. Besides, if he spoke, she would produce his letter, and all his accusations would appear to Risler pure calumnies. Ah! Mr. Avenger, we've got you now!

Suddenly she was seized with a fit of delirious joy. "I live again, I live again!" said she to Madame Dobson.

She ran along the garden-paths, made great bouquets for the drawing-room, opened wide the windows to the sun, and gave orders to the cook, the coachman and the gardener. The house must be made beautiful. George was going to return, and to begin with she organised a grand dinner for the end of the week. Really one would have said she had been absent for a month, and had returned from a troublesome and wearying business journey, she was in such a hurry to surround herself with movement and life.

The next evening Sidonie, Risler, and Madame Dobson were sitting together in the drawing-room. While Risler was poring over the leaves of an old book on mechanics, Madame Dobson played an accompaniment to Sidonie's singing. Suddenly the latter stopped in the middle of her song to give vent to a loud peal of laughter. Ten o'clock had just struck.

Risler raised his nose quickly: "What makes you laugh?"

"Nothing—only an idea," answered Sidonie, indicating the hour to Madame Dobson with a wink. It was the hour appointed for the rendezvous, and she was thinking of the torments of her lover waiting her coming.

Since the return of the messenger who had brought Sidonie's feverishly expected "yes," to Frank, a great calm had come over the latter's troubled spirit, a sudden relief as it were. No more uncertainties, no more struggles between passion and

duty. Instantaneously he felt relieved, it seemed as if he had no longer a conscience. With the greatest calmness, he made his preparations, dragged out his trunks on the floor, emptied the drawers and the cupboards, and long before the hour fixed for the removal of his luggage he was seated on a chest in the middle of his room, looking before him at the map nailed to the wall, like an emblem of his wandering life, following with his eyes the straight line of the roads, and the outline undulating like a wave, that marked the oceans.

Not once did the thought occur to him that on the other side of the landing some one was weeping and sighing for his sake. Not once did he think of the despair of his brother, of the frightful drama he was about to leave behind him. He was far away from all these things, was already on the platform of the station with Sidonie attired in sombre garments for travel and flight, or farther off still, by the shore of the blue sea, where they would stop for some time so as to baffle search. And even farther away, arriving with her in an unknown land where no one could demand or recapture her. At other times he imagined himself in the railway-carriage travelling during the night through the deserted country. He saw a pale little face leaning against his own on the cushions, a flower-like lip within reach of his, and two deep eyes looking at him beneath the soft light of the lamp, by the sounds of wheels and steam.

And now, engine, puff and roar! Shake the earth, redden the sky, spit out smoke and flame! Plunge thyself into tunnels, cross mountains and rivers, leap, blaze, burst; but bear us with thee, bear us far from the inhabited world, from its laws and its affections, out of life, out of ourselves!

Two hours before the opening of the wicket for the issue of tickets for the appointed train, Frank was already at the Lyons Station, that dull station which, situated in a remote part of Paris, seems itself the first stage into the country. He seated himself in the darkest corner and remained there without moving, as if stunned. His brain was as agitated and busy as the station itself. He felt invaded by a host of inconsequent reflections, vague memories, strange reconciliations. Within the space of a minute he made mental excursions so remote that he asked himself two or three times why he was there and what he was waiting for. But the idea of Sidonie would spring up in the midst of these incoherent thoughts and illuminate them with a full light.

She was coming.

And mechanically, though the hour of meeting was still distant, he peered among the people who crowded in, thinking to perceive that elegant outline emerging suddenly from the throng and scattering it at every step by the radiance of its beauty.

After many departures and arrivals, accompanied by shrill whistles whose sound, confined under the arched roof, seemed like a cry of anguish, the station became suddenly deserted like a church on week-days. At last the time for the departure of the ten o'clock train drew near. Frank rose.

Now it was no longer a dream, a chimera, lost in the vast and uncertain limits of time. In a quarter of an hour, in half an hour at the furthest, she would be there. Then the horrible pain of waiting commenced, that suspension of one's whole being, that singular state of body and mind when the heart no longer beats, when the respiration pants like the thought, when gestures and phrases remain unfinished, when everything awaits. Poets have a hundred times described this grievous anguish of the lover who listens for the rolling of the carriage in the deserted street, the furtive step mounting the stairs.

But waiting for your mistress in a railway station, in a waiting-room, is a still more mournful affair. The lamps lighted but dull, their rays falling, without reflection, on a dusty floor, the great glazed spaces, the incessant noise of feet and doors sounding in the disturbed ears, the bare height of the walls, with their announcements of an "Excursion to Monaco," a "Tour in Switzerland," the atmosphere of travel, change, indifference, inconstancy, all is calculated to oppress the heart and increase the anguish of the lover.

Frank walked up and down, watching the carriages that arrived. They stopped in front of the long stone steps. The doors were opened and closed noisily, the faces of the new arrivals, suddenly emerging from the outer darkness, appeared in the blaze of light on the threshold, faces serene or troubled, happy or heart-broken, bonnets with feathers and light-coloured veils mingling with peasants' caps, sleepy children being dragged along by the hand. Every new comer sent a thrill through him. He thought he saw her—hesitating, veiled, slightly embarrassed. How quickly he would be beside her, to re-assure her, to protect her.

In proportion as the station became crowded, his watch

became more difficult. Arriving vehicles succeeded each other without interruption. He was obliged to run from one entrance to the other. Then he went outside, thinking he would be more likely to see her there, and being, moreover, unable any longer to bear the sense of oppression that began to steal over him amidst the stifling atmosphere of the waiting-room.

It was a dull, damp night, towards the end of September ; a tight mist hung about, and the lamps of the vehicles appeared dim and lustreless at the foot of the broad sloping causeway. Every woman who arrived seemed to be saying, "It is I, here I am." But it was never Sidonie that alighted, and each carriage that he had nervously watched coming from a distance—as though it contained more than his life, his heart swelling with hope the while—he saw drive off empty like the others.

The hour of departure drew near. He looked at the clock. There was only a quarter of an hour left, but that appeared to him intolerable ; however, the bell, announcing that the ticket-place was opened, summoned him. He ran there and took his place in the long file of people.

"Two first-class for Marseilles," demanded he. He seemed already to be taking possession.

Getting clear of the heavily laden luggage trucks and the late arrivals who jostled against each other, he returned to his post of observation. The cabmen kept calling on him to "look out!" But he remained stock-still as one stunned, with his eyes wide open, right in the track of the wheels, almost under the feet of the horses. Only five minutes more ! It was almost impossible for her to arrive in time. People rushed to reach the platform. The heavy trunks were hastily wheeled to the luggage vans ; and the huge packages wrapped up in canvas, the portmanteaus with their bright brass nails, the little hand-bags of the commercial travellers, and the baskets, of all shapes and sizes, were jolted away with the same haste.

At last she appeared.

Yes, there she is ! it is indeed her—a lady dressed in black, tall and slim, accompanied by another one rather shorter, Madame Dobson, no doubt. But, on looking again, he was undeceived. It was a young Parisian woman who resembled Sidonie, elegant like she was, and with a happy countenance. A young man at that moment joined her. They were probably a newly-married couple, and with them was the young wife's mother, who had come to see them into the carriage.

They swept past quite close to Frank, absorbed by the current of happiness that carried them away. With a feeling of rage and envy he saw them pass under the heavy door-way, pressing close to each other, united and clasped together in the crowd. It seemed to him as though they had robbed him, that it was his and Sidonie's place they were going to occupy in the train.

Now comes the flurry of departure, the last ring of the bell, the steam getting up with a dull sound mingled with which are the hasty footsteps of the late arrivals, the banging of doors and the rumble of the heavy omnibuses. And still Sidonie does not come. Yet Frank waits on. At that moment a hand was placed on his shoulder. Heavens !

He turned round. The large head of M. Gardinois enveloped in a cap with long ears is before him.

"I am not mistaken, it is M. Risler ! You are going then by the Marseilles' express ? So am I, but not far."

He explained to Frank that he had missed the Orleans' train and that he intended getting to Savigny by the Lyons' line ; then he spoke of Risler the elder and of the factory. "It seems that business has not been going on very well for some time past. They have suffered from Bonnardel's bankruptcy. Ah ! our young people need to take care. From the pace at which they are going they may be caught the same as Bonnardel. But excuse me ; I think the ticket place is closing. I will see you again."

Frank has scarcely understood what has just been said to him. The ruin of his brother, the destruction of the whole world, nothing is of any moment to him just now. He waits ; he waits. But hark, the wicket slams so sharply, like a final barrier in face of his stubborn hope. The station is again empty. Its noise is transferred to the metal-way, and suddenly a loud whistle reaches the lover like an ironical farewell. The ten o'clock train is gone !

He tries to be calm and to reason. Evidently she has missed the train from Asnières, but knowing that he is waiting for her, she will certainly come, no-matter at what hour of the night. He must therefore still wait. The waiting rooms are intended for that.

The unhappy man sits down on a bench. They have closed the large windows whereon the shadows are reflected with gleams of light. The drowsy mistress of the bookstall is pre-

paring to shut up for the night. Frank mechanically scans the rows of many coloured volumes, the titles of which he has learnt by heart during the time he has been waiting. There are books which he recognised as having read in his tent at Ismailia, or on board the packet that brought him back from Suez, and all these common, insignificant romances have for him a marine or exotic perfume. But at length the bookstall is closed, and he has no longer even that resource against the feverishness and fatigue which have seized hold of him. The neighbouring toys too have disappeared within their boarded enclosure; the whistles, the wheelbarrows, the watering cans, the shovels, and the rakes—the complete country equipment, in short, of a juvenile Parisian have vanished in a moment. The stall-keeper, a sad and sickly looking woman, wraps herself in an old cloak and goes off with her foot-warmer in her hand.

All these people have finished their day's work after prolonging it to the last moment with all the valour and obstinacy of Paris which does not extinguish its lamps until daylight. This idea of late work sets Frank thinking of a well-known room where at that very moment the lamp light falls upon a table covered with humming-birds and fire-flies; but this vision only flashes rapidly across his mind in the chaos of disjointed thoughts caused by the delirium of waiting.

Suddenly he is seized with an intolerable thirst. The café of the station is still open, and he enters it. The night-waiters are dozing on the seats. They take an endless time to serve him; and then at the moment of drinking, the thought that Sidonie has perhaps arrived during his absence, and is seeking him in the waiting-room, causes him to leap to his feet and rush out like a madman, leaving his glass still full and his change on the table.

She will not come now. He feels she will not.

The echo of his footsteps, regular and monotonous, along the stone landing in front of the station irritate him as a witness of his loneliness and disappointment. What has happened? What can have kept her away? Has she been ill, or is it the anticipated remorse of her fault? But in that case, she would have let him know, she would have sent Madame Dobson. Perhaps, too, Risler may have seen the letter. She is so foolish, so imprudent.

And while he was thus lost in conjectures, the night was waning. Already the roofs of the jail of Mazas, plunged in

darkness, were becoming lighter and more distinct. What should he do? He must go to Asnières at once and try to find out what had kept her away. He wished himself there already.

The resolution taken, he descended the slope of the station with a rapid step, passing on his way soldiers with their kits, poor people arriving for the morning train, the train of the miserable who get up early. He crossed the Paris of day-break, a Paris sad and shivering, where the lamps of the police-stations throw out their red glare at distant intervals, and the policemen pace along in couples, stopping at the corners of the streets, and scrutinising the darkness with a glance.

Before one of these stations he saw a crowd collected, rag-pickers, country-women, and such like. Doubtless some midnight drama was about to be unravelled before the commissary of police. "Ah! if Frank had only known what that drama was? But he could not suspect it, and noted it from afar with indifference.

All these depressing surroundings, this dawn that rose over Paris with weary paleness, the lamps twinkling on the banks of the Seine like the tapers of a funeral watch, the exhaustion of his sleepless night, oppressed him with a profound sadness.

When he reached Asnières, after a walk of two or three hours, it was like an awakening. The sun rising in all his glory lit up the plain and the water. The bridge, the houses, the quay, all had that morning clearness which gives the impression of a new-born day, rising bright and smiling from out the thick mist of night. From afar he saw his brother's house already astir, the open shutters displaying the flowers in the windows. He lingered for some time before daring to enter. Suddenly some one hailed him from the river bank: "Why, here's Monsieur Frank! How early you are this morning!" It was Sidonie's coachman taking his horses to water.

"Nothing new at the house?" inquired Frank trembling.

"Nothing new, Monsieur Frank."

"Is my brother at home?"

"No; Monsieur Risler slept at the factory."

"No one is ill?"

"No, Monsieur Frank, no one that I know of." And the horses went into the water up to their chests, splashing among the foam.

Frank decided to ring at the side door. Men were raking

the garden walks. The house was all astir, and, despite the early hour, he heard the sound of Sidonie's voice coming from the rose bushes, clear and vibrating like the song of a bird.

She spoke with animation. Frank, greatly moved, approached to listen. "No, no more cream! The iced cream will be sufficient; but let it be well iced, remember, and ready for seven o'clock. Ah! and for the *entrée*—let me see."

She was in full conference with her cook for her famous dinner on the morrow. The sudden appearance of her brother-in-law did not at all disturb her.

"Ah, good morning, Frank," said she to him quite tranquilly, "I will be with you directly. We have some people to dinner to-morrow—customers of the firm—a great business dinner. You'll excuse me, won't you?"

Fresh and smiling amidst the white frills of her little lace cap and her trailing dressing-gown, she continued settling her *menu*, inhaling the while the fresh air that rose from the fields and the river. Her calm countenance did not bear the slightest trace of vexation or uneasiness. Her smooth forehead, that charming look of surprise which would long cause her to appear young, and her slightly-parted rosy lips offered a strange contrast to the worn face of the lover harassed by a night of anguish and fatigue.

During a long quarter of an hour Frank seated in a corner of the room saw defile before him in their usual order all the conventional dishes of a middle class dinner, from the tiny patties, the sole *à la Normande* and the innumerable ingredients of which its surroundings are composed, down to the Montreuil peaches and the Fontainebleau grapes. She did not spare him a single side-dish.

At last when they were alone and he could speak, "You did not receive my letter then," said he in a hoarse voice.

"Oh! yes, I did," replied she.

She was standing before the glass adjusting some little curls that had got entangled with her waving ribbons, and still looking at herself added: "Oh, dear! yes, I received your letter, and I was immensely pleased to receive it. Now, if ever you are seized with a desire to make the villainous reports you threatened me with to your brother, I can easily prove to him that the spite of a criminal love, repulsed by me as it deserved to be, is the sole cause of these lying accusations. Consider yourself warned, my dear, and now, good-day!"

Happy as an actress who has just concluded an effective tirade, she swept before him and quitted the room smiling, triumphant and calm.

CHAPTER V.

A PARAGRAPH FOR THE NEWSPAPERS.

ON the eve of this ill-omened day, a few moments after Frank had furtively left his room in the Rue de Braque the illustrious Delobelle returned home quite upset, with the weary and disabused air which he always assumed when matters went at all contrary.

"Good heavens! my poor man, what has happened to you?" was the question at once put by his wife, whom twenty years of theatrical and exaggerated mimicry had not yet disabused.

Before answering, the actor who never failed to preface his smallest phrases by some facial play formerly studied for the stage, drew down the corners of his mouth in token of disgust and discouragement, as if he had just that moment swallowed something very bitter.

"Decidedly," said he, "those Rislers are ungrateful or selfish, and certainly very ill-bred. Do you know what I have just learned down below from the porter who looked at me out of the corner of his eye in a jeering manner. Why, Frank Risler is gone. He left the house some time ago, and has perhaps left Paris too by this time, without even coming to shake hands, to thank me for the welcome he received here. What do you think of his conduct? For he has not said good-bye to you either, has he? And yet not a month ago he was always thrusting himself among us, though I will say nothing about that.

Madame Delobelle uttered an exclamation of genuine surprise and vexation. Désirée, on the other hand, said not a word, made no sort of sign. Always the same little icicle. The wire she was twisting between her agile fingers did not even come to a stop.

"Talk about friends," continued the illustrious Delobelle, "what have I ever done to annoy him?"

It was one of Delobelle's affectations to believe himself pursued by the hatred of the whole world. This was part of the attitude in life assumed by this martyr for art's sake.

Gently, with almost maternal tenderness—for there is always something maternal in the indulgent and forgiving affection that these great babies inspire—Madame Delobelle consoled her husband, humoured him, added a tit-bit to the dinner. In reality the poor devil felt truly hurt; Frank gone, the post of continual Amphitryon, formerly played by Risler the elder, was again vacant, and the actor thought of all the little kindnesses he would lose.

And to think that, beside this egotistic and superficial grief, there was another sorrow real and immense, the sorrow that kills, and which this blinded mother did not perceive! But look at your daughter, unhappy woman. Look at that transparent pallor, those tearless eyes that shine fixedly as if they concentrated their thoughts and their gaze on an object visible to themselves alone. Draw out this little pent-up suffering soul. Question your child. Make her speak, above all make her weep to relieve her of the weight that is stifling her, so that her eyes blinded with tears may no longer gaze into space, on that horrible unknown thing they are so desperately fixed on.

Alas! there are some women in whom the mother kills the wife; in this one the wife had killed the mother. Priestess of the god Delobelle, absorbed in the contemplation of her idol, she imagined that her daughter had only come into the world to devote herself to the same worship, to kneel before the same altar. Both ought to have but one aim in life; to labour for the glory of the great man, to console his unrecognised genius. Nought else ought to exist for her. Madame Delobelle had never observed the sudden blush of Désirée whenever Frank entered the room—all those artifices of a girl in love to be continually speaking of him, to bring forward his name on all occasions in their talk over their work—had escaped her notice, and this had gone on for years, in fact ever since the far-off time when Frank set out in the morning for the Ecole Centrale at the same hour as the two women lit their lamp to begin the labours of the day.

Never had she questioned those long silences in which happy and confident youth double-locks itself with its dreams of the future; and if at times she said to Désirée, whose reserve wearied her, "What's the matter with you?" the young girl

had only to answer, "Oh! nothing," and her mother's thoughts, disturbed for a moment, returned directly to their favourite pre-occupation.

Thus this woman who read the heart of her husband, who deciphered the meaning of the least wrinkle of his empty Olympian brow, had never had for her poor Zizi any of those inspirations of tenderness in which the most aged and withered mothers grow sufficiently young again to become the confidants of, and counsellors to a childish friendship.

And this is really the most terrible effect of the unconscionable egotism of men like Delobelle. It forms other egoisms around it. The custom prevalent in certain families of concentrating everything upon a single being, leaves all the conscious joys and sorrows that are alike indifferent and useless to him forcibly in the shade. And I ask you, in what way could the juvenile and painful drama that filled the heart of the poor loving girl with tears, affect the glory of the great comedian?

Yet she suffered sorely. For nearly a month, ever since the day Sidonie came in her carriage to seek for Frank, Désirée knew she was no longer loved, and also knew the name of her rival. She bore no grudge against them, but rather pitied them. Only why had he come back to her, why had he so lightly held out to her this false hope? As wretches doomed to the obscurity of a dungeon accustom their eyes to the shades of darkness and their limbs to the contracted space, and then if they are led for a moment into the light, find on returning the dungeon more sad, the darkness more dense; so did she, poor child, when this great light appeared suddenly in her life and then as suddenly faded, feel sadder than ever when resuming all the old captivity. What tears shed in silence from that moment! what sorrows told to her little birds! For once again it was work that sustained her, work without respite, which by its regularity, its monotony, the constant return of the same cares, the same actions, served to control her thoughts.

And as under her fingers the little dead birds recovered an appearance of life, so her illusions, her hopes, dead like them, and impregnated with a poison still more subtle and penetrating than that which floated around her work-table, seemed to flap their wings again from time to time with an effort mingled with anguish and with the transports of resurrection. Frank was not altogether lost to her. Though he rarely came to see her, she knew he was there, she heard him come in and go out,

walk restlessly across the floor, and sometimes through the half-open door she could see his beloved figure swiftly cross the landing. He did not seem happy. Besides, what happiness could there be for him? He loved his brother's wife! And at the thought that Frank was not happy, the good creature almost forgot her own grief to think only of the grief of him she loved.

That he might return and love her again, she well knew was no longer possible. But she fancied that perhaps one day she would see him enter wounded and dying, that he would sit down on the little low chair, and laying his head on her lap would tell her, with a great sob, of his grief and would say to her: "Comfort me." This pitiful hope had kept her alive for three weeks. She needed so little! But, no! even that was denied her. Frank had gone, gone without one look for her, without a word of farewell. Following the treason of the lover, came the treason of the friend. It was horrible.

At the first words of her father she felt herself cast into a deep icy abyss, full of darkness, into which she descended rapidly, unconsciously, yet knowing well that there would be no return towards the light. She was choking: She would have wished to resist, to struggle, to call for help. But to whom? She knew well her mother would not hear her. Sidonie? Oh! she knew her now. She might just as well appeal to those little lophophora with lustrous plumage whose small sharp eyes watched her with such reckless merri-ment.

The most terrible part of it was, that she understood at once that this time work itself would not save her. It had lost its beneficent property. Her inert arms had no more strength; her weary hands fell to her sides in the indolence of a great discouragement. What indeed could have sustained her in the midst of this great disaster? God? That which we call Heaven?

She did not even think of them. In Paris, especially in the districts occupied by the working classes, the houses are too high, the streets too narrow, the atmosphere too dense for a sight of heaven to be obtained. It is lost amid the smoke of factories and the fog that rises from the damp roofs; besides life is so hard for the greater part of these people, that if the idea of Providence mingles with their misery it is only for them to shake their fists at it and curse it. This is why there are so many

suicides in Paris. The people who know not how to pray are ready at any time to die. Death presents itself to them as the end of all their sufferings—death that delivers and consoles. It was this death that the little lame girl regarded so fixedly.

Her mind was made up at once. She must die. But how?

Motionless in her arm-chair whilst the stupid life went on around her, whilst her mother got the dinner ready, and the great man delivered a long monologue on human ingratitude, she thought over the kind of death she would choose.

Being hardly ever alone, it was no good her having recourse to the pan of charcoal that one lights after having stopped up the doors and windows. Never going out, she must not think either of the poison one buys of the herbalist, a little packet of white powder that one thrusts to the bottom of one's pocket with the needlecase and thimble. There was, indeed, the sulphur from off the matches, the verdigris from the old coppers, the open window looking on to the pavement; but the thought of distressing her parents with the horrible spectacle of a voluntary agony, that what remained of her, taken up amidst a crowd of people, would be so frightful for them to gaze upon, made her reject the idea at once.

Yet there still remained the river. At any rate, water sometimes bears you so far away that no one finds you, and your death is thus surrounded with mystery. The river! She trembled at the thought. But it was not the vision of the dark deep water that frightened her. The girls of Paris laugh at that. One throws one's apron over one's head, so as not to see, and then a jump! But she would have to go down stairs, to go out into the street all alone, and the street frightened her.

While the young girl was taking, in anticipation, this supreme spring towards death and oblivion, while she viewed the abyss from afar off with haggard eyes in which the madness of suicide already disclosed itself, the illustrious Delobelle gradually became more lively, and spoke less dramatically. And as he had cabbage, of which he was very fond, for dinner, he softened while eating, recalled his old triumphs, the golden wreath, and the subscribers of Alençon. As soon as dinner was over, he went off, nicely got up, with clean wrist-bands, and having a bright new five franc piece in his pocket—which his wife had given him, to act the bachelor with—to see the *Misanthrope* at the Odéon, in which Robricart was to make his first appearance.

"I am so thankful," said Madame Delobelle, clearing the table, "your father had a good dinner this evening. That has consoled him a little, poor man. The theatre will amuse him. He has so much need of it."

Yes, the terrible thing was to go out in the street alone. She would have to wait till the gas was put out, creep softly down the staircase when her mother was in bed, call to the porter to pull the latch back, and make her way through that Paris where one meets men that look at you impudently in the face, and sees cafés all ablaze with light. Désirée had felt this terror of the streets ever since her childhood. When quite little, she went out on some errand, the street-boys would follow her laughing, and she did not know which she found the most painful, this mockery of her irregular gait, the hobbling of these insolent little wretches, or the pity of the passers-by who turned their looks charitably aside. Besides, she was afraid of the carriages and omnibuses. The river too was far off. She was sure to be very tired. Still there was no other way but that.

"I am going to bed, little one, are you going to sit up any longer?"

With her eyes fixed on her work the child replied she would sit up. She wished to finish the dozen she was working on.

"Good-night, then," said the mother, whose weakened sight could not bear the lamp light for long. "I have put your father's supper near the fire. You will see to it before you go to bed."

Désirée had not lied; she wished to finish the dozen, so that her father could deliver it in the morning, and truly, to see that little head calmly bending beneath the pale light of the lamp, one would never have suspected what sinister thoughts were at work within it.

Well, here is the last bird of the dozen, a marvellous little bird, whose wings seem as if soaked in sea-water, quite green with gleams of sapphire. Carefully, coquetishly, Désirée fixes it on a brass wire in the pretty attitude of a startled bird, taking wing. Oh! how well it seems to fly, the little blue bird! What a flight into space! How one feels that this is the long journey—the endless journey without return.

And now the task is done, the table pushed back, the last threads of silk carefully collected, the pins all in the pin-cushion. The father returning will find the lamp half turned down, the supper in front of the warm cinders, and this frightful and

sinister evening will appear to him as calm as all the others, in the order of the home, and the strict attention to all his caprices.

Very softly Désirée opens the wardrobe and takes from it a little shawl which she wraps round her, and then she goes out.

What? Not a look for her mother, no mute good-bye, not a tear? No, nothing! With the terrible lucidity of those about to die, she at once comprehends everything, to what egotistical love her childhood and her youth have been sacrificed. She feels quite sure that one word from their great man will console this sleeping woman, whom she almost blames for not waking, for letting her go away thus without even a quiver of her closed eyelids. When one dies young, even voluntarily, it is never without a feeling of repulsion, and poor Désirée, as she gives up her life, feels indignant at her destiny.

Now she is in the street. Whither is she bound? All is already deserted. This quarter, so animated in the daytime, becomes silent at an early hour. The inhabitants work too much not to retire to rest quickly. While the Paris of the boulevards, still full of life, casts over the entire city the rosy reflection of a distant fire, here all the great gates are closed, the shutters to the shops and windows shut. From time to time a late knock, the tramp of a sergent-de-ville, whom one hears without seeing, the soliloquy of some drunkard interrupted by his stumbles, disturb the silence, or perhaps a sudden gust of wind coming from the neighbouring quays, rattles the panes of the gas-lamps, or the old rope of a pulley sweeps round the corner of a street, and disappears with a whizzing sound under some rickety door.

Wrapped in her little shawl Désirée walks quickly along with dry eyes and head erect. Without knowing the way she goes straight, quite straight before her. The dark, narrow streets of the Marais, in which the lamps flicker far apart, cross each other and wind about, and every instant in her feverish search, she wanders back in the same direction. There is always something which seems to place itself between her and the river. Yet the wind wafts its damp freshness to her face. Really one would think that the water retired, surrounded itself with barriers, that thick walls and high houses placed themselves expressly in the way of death; but the little cripple is pertinacious, and over the uneven pavement of the streets she walks and walks.

Have you ever seen, on the evening of a day's shooting, a

wounded partridge fly to the hollow of a furrow? Keeping close to the ground it drags itself along with its bleeding wing towards some shelter where it may die in peace. The hesitating gait of this little shadow following the foot pavement, grazing the walls, imparts exactly the same impression. And to think that at the same hour, almost in the same place, some one else was also roaming the streets, waiting, watching in despair. Ah! if they could but meet. If she were to accost this restless wayfarer, if she were to ask him her way: "If you please, sir, the way to the Seine?"

He would recognise her at once. "What! is it you, Mam'selle Zizi? What are you doing abroad at such an hour?"

"I am going to die, Frank. 'Tis you who have made me sick of life."

Then he, thoroughly afflicted, would take her up, would strain her to him; would carry her in his arms, saying, "Oh! no, don't die. I want you to console me, to cure me of the ill the other has wrought in me."

But all this is a poet's dream, one of those meetings that life does not know how to invent. Life is much too cruel for that. And when sometimes so little is necessary to save an existence, life takes good care not to provide that little. That is why true tales are always so sad.

Streets, more streets, then an open space and a bridge with lamps that reflect in the dark waters the outline of another luminous bridge. Here is the river at last. The mist of this mild damp autumn evening displays before Désirée all this Paris, hitherto unknown to her, in a confused magnitude which her ignorance of localities still further increases. It is just the place for her to die.

She feels so small, so isolated, so lost in the immensity of the great illumined and deserted city. It seems to her that she is already dead. She approaches the quay and suddenly a perfume of flowers, of foliage, of fresh turned earth arrests her for a minute on her way. At her feet, on the pavement skirting the river, masses of shrubs swathed in straw, and pots of flowers arrayed in white paper, are already arranged for the morrow's market. Leaning back in their chairs, wrapped in their shawls, and with their feet on their foot warmers, are the market women, rendered torpid by sleep and the fresh air of the night. The china asters of all colours, the mignonette, the late autumn roses scent the air. Set out in the rays of the moon,

surrounded by their indistinct shadows, transported, transplanted, they await the caprice of sleeping Paris.

Poor little Désirée ! One might say that all her youth, her rare days of pleasure, and her unrequited love, rise to her heart in the perfumes of this moving garden. She walks softly in the midst of the flowers. Sometimes a gust of wind makes the shrubs rustle one against the other like the branches of a forest, and at the edge of the pavement baskets full of uprooted plants emit an odour of moist earth.

She recalls the trip into the country with Frank. The breath of nature which she inhaled that day for the first time, she finds again at the moment of dying. "Do you remember ?" it seemed to say to her, and she answered to herself, "Oh ! yes, I remember."

She remembers only too well. Arrived at the end of this quay, decked out as if for a fête, the little furtive shadow halts at the steps leading down to the water's edge. . . .

Almost immediately there are cries, and a rush along the quay.

"Quick, a boat ! the drags !"

Bargemen, sergents-de-ville, run from all directions. A boat leaves the bank with a lantern at the prow. The flower-women wake up, and when one of them asks, with a yawn, "What is the matter ?" the coffee-stall-keeper crouching at the corner of the bridge, calmly answers : "It is a woman who has just jumped into the water."

Well, no ! The river would not receive this child. It has taken pity on so much grace and gentleness. See there, by the light of the lanterns that are moving about by the water's edge, a dark group forms and is quickly in motion. She is saved ! It is a ballast-heaver who has fished her up. Sergents-de-ville carry her, surrounded by bargemen and nocturnal loafers, and out of the night is heard a coarse, gruff, jeering voice, saying : "The little water-hen gave me some trouble, I can tell you. You should have seen how she slipped through my fingers. I believe she wanted me to lose my reward for saving her." Gradually the tumult calms down, the curious disperse, and while the little dark group passes on towards the police-station, the flower-sellers resume their slumbers, and on the deserted quay the plants rustle in the night air.

Ah ! poor girl, you thought it was easy to get rid of life, to

disappear all at once. You did not know that the river, instead of bearing you quickly away from the cares of the world, would cast you back to endure all the shame and ignominy of a would-be suicide. First, there was the hideous police-station, with its dirty benches, its muddy floor. It was there that Désirée had to pass the remainder of the night. They had laid her on a camp-bed before the stove, which had been charitably crammed full on her account. The unwholesome warmth soon caused her heavy, wet, dripping garments to steam. Where was she? She could not tell. These men lying all around on beds like hers, the empty dreariness of the large room, the yells of two confined drunkards, who hammered against the door at the further end, uttering frightful oaths the while—the little cripple heard and saw all this vaguely, without comprehending it.

Near her was a woman in rags, with her hair falling over her shoulders, crouching down in front of the stove, the red glare of which failed to put colour into her pale and haggard face. She was some mad woman who had been picked up during the night, a poor creature who mechanically shook her head and incessantly repeated in an unconscious voice, almost independent of the motion of her lips: "Oh! yes, misery, you may well say so—Oh! yes, misery, you may well say so." And this sinister lament, mingled with the snoring of the sleepers, oppressed Désirée with a horrible feeling. She closed her eyes, in order not to see this wild-looking face, which terrified her as the personification of her own despair. From time to time the outer door was half opened, an officer called out some names, and two sergents-de-ville went on duty, while two others entering, threw themselves upon the beds, like weary sailors who have passed the night on deck, and just been relieved from their watch.

At last daylight appeared, with its cold white rays, which are so painful to invalids. Awakened suddenly from her torpor, Désirée rose in her bed, threw off the cloak in which they had wrapped her, and in spite of fatigue and fever, tried to stand up and recover possession of herself and of her will. She had but one idea, which was to escape from all the staring eyes around her, to leave this frightful place where sleep was attended with such heavy breathing and such restless repose.

"Gentlemen, I entreat you," said she trembling, "let me go home to my mother."

Hardened as they were to Parisian dramas, these worthy fellows understood that they were in presence of something more reputable, more affecting than ordinary. But they could not let her go to her mother then. She must go before the commissary of police first; that was indispensable. Out of pity for her they called a cab; for there was such a crowd collected, to see the little cripple leave the station wrapped in the uniform cloak which did not prevent her shivering, and with her wet hair clinging to her temples.

At the commissary's she has to mount a dark, damp staircase up and down which criminal looking individuals are passing. A folding door opening every instant from the endless requirements of the public service, cold ill-lighted rooms, with benches occupied by people, either dumbfounded or asleep, vagabonds, thieves and street walkers, a table covered with an old green cloth at which the commissary's clerk, a tall fellow in a threadbare frock-coat and with a head like an usher's, is writing. It was here that Désirée found herself.

As she entered, a man rose from out of the darkness and came up to her holding out his hand. It was the man who had saved her, the hideous rescuer at a pound per head.

"Well! little woman," said he with his cynical laugh and his voice that reminded one of foggy nights on the water, "how do we feel after our dip?"

And he related to the people around, how he had fished her up, how he had caught hold of her so, and then so, and how without him she would certainly have been drifting towards Rouen with the under current.

The unhappy girl was burning with fever and shame, confused to such a degree that it seemed to her as though the water had left a veil over her eyes, a buzzing in her ears. At length they ushered her into a smaller room, into the presence of a solemn decorated personage, the commissary of police himself, who was engaged in sipping his coffee and reading the *Gazette des Tribunaux*.

While dipping a piece of bread into his cup and without raising his eyes from his paper, "Ah! it's you," said he, with a gruff voice, and the corporal who had brought in Désirée at once began to read his report. "At a quarter before midnight on the quai of La Mégisserie, in front of the house, No. 17, the prisoner Delobelle, twenty-four years of age, artificial flower maker, living with her parents in the Rue de Braque, attempted

to commit suicide by throwing herself into the Seine, from which she was rescued safe and sound by the Sieur Parcheminet, ballast-beaver, residing in the Rue de la Butte-Chaumont."

The commissary continuing his breakfast, listened with the uninterested and weary air of a man who is no longer astonished at anything, and at the close of the report gave the prisoner Delobelle a severe and searching look, and then lectured her in fine style. What she had done was very shocking, and very cowardly. What could have led her to commit such a wicked action? Why did she wish to destroy herself? "Come, answer, Delobelle, why?"

But the prisoner Delobelle obstinately refused to explain. It seemed to her that it would be profaning her love to avow it in such a place. "I don't know, I don't know," said she in a low tone, shivering.

Vexed and impatient, the commissary said that she should be taken back to her parents, but only on one condition, which was that she promised never to do it again. "Come, do you promise me?"

"Oh! yes, sir."

"You will never do it again?"

"No! quite sure, never again—never again."

In spite of her protestations, the commissary of police shook his head as if he did not believe in this promise.

At last she is outside, on her way home, on her way to a refuge; but her sufferings are not yet over. In the carriage, the sergent-de-ville who accompanies her is too polite, too amiable. She pretends not to understand, moves away, withdraws her hand. What a punishment! But the worst is the arrival in the Rue de Braque, the house all upset, the curiosity of the neighbours which she has to endure. Since morning, all the quarter had been made aware of her disappearance. The rumour was that she had run off with Frank Risler. At an early hour the illustrious Delobelle had been seen to go out, thoroughly scared, with his hat half off and his cuffs rumpled, which was the sign of an extraordinary pre-occupation, and the porter, on taking up some parcels, had found the poor mother half mad, running from one room to another, seeking for a line from her child, a trace, no matter how slight, that might help her at least to some conjecture. A tardy light on her daughter's attitude during the last few

days, and her silence respecting Frank's departure, had suddenly entered the mind of this unhappy mother.

"Do not cry, wife—I will bring her back," said the father on leaving, and ever since he went out she had done nothing but pace from the window to the landing, from the landing to the window, as much with the view of obtaining information as of helping her to forget her great sorrow. At the least sound on the stairs, she would open the door with a beating heart, and hasten outside, and then, when she returned, the solitude of the little lodging, increased by the sight of Désirée's great empty arm-chair, half turned towards the work-table would make her burst into tears.

Suddenly a carriage stopped before the house. Voices and the sound of footsteps resounded in the hall. "Madame Delobelle, here she is! Your daughter is found."

It was indeed Désirée who came up the stairs pale and faint, leaning on the arm of a stranger, without shawl or bonnet, and wrapped in a great brown cloak. On seeing her mother, she smiled at her with an almost silly expression.

"Don't be frightened, it's nothing," she tried to say, and then swooned away on the floor. Never had Madame Delobelle believed herself so strong. To seize her daughter, carry her to the room, put her to bed, was the affair of a minute, and how she talked to her, and embraced her!

"At last, it is you. Where do you come from, unhappy child? Is it true, tell me, that you tried to kill yourself? You had some very great trouble then? Why did you hide it from me?"

Finding her mother in such a state, her face bathed in tears, grown old in a few hours, Désirée was seized with an immense remorse. She remembered how she had gone out without a word of farewell, and how at the bottom of her heart she had accused her mother of not loving her. Not love her!

"But your death would have been my death," said the poor woman, "Oh! when I got up this morning and saw that your bed had not been slept in, that you were not in the work-room either, I turned round and fell all of a heap. Are you warm now? are you comfortable? You will never do it again, will you? You won't want to die? You will not try to kill yourself?" And she tucked in the bed-clothes, warmed the child's feet, and did all she could to soothe her.

While resting in her bed, her eyes closed, Désirée saw again

all the details of her attempted suicide, all the hideous things she had passed through in coming back from death. In the fever that was increasing, in the heavy slumber that began to overcome her, her mad race through Paris still agitated and tormented her. Thousands of dark streets, all leading to the Seine, rose before her. The Seine ! That horrible river, which she could not find when seeking it, pursued her now ! She felt splashed all over with its filth and slime ; and in the night-mare that oppressed her, the poor child, not knowing how to escape from these memories, kept whispering to her mother : " Hide me, hide me. I am ashamed ! "

CHAPTER VI.

SHE HAS PROMISED NEVER TO DO IT AGAIN.

OH ! no, she will never do it again, the commissary of the police may rest assured of that. There is no fear of her trying. How could she, in the first place, get to the river, now that she can no longer rise in her bed ? If the commissary could see her at this moment, he would no longer doubt her word. No doubt, that wish, that desire to die, so fatally inscribed the other morning on her pale face, are still visible in all her being, only they are softened, subdued. The prisoner Delobelle knows that by waiting a little, a very little longer, she will have nothing more to wish for.

The doctors maintain that she is dying of inflammation of the lungs ; she, perhaps, brought that with her in her wet garments. The doctors are mistaken : it is not inflammation of the lungs. Then it must be her love that is killing her ? No ! Since that terrible night she thinks no longer of Frank ; she feels no longer worthy of loving or of being loved. Henceforth there is a stain on her hitherto guiltless life, and that is what she is dying of.

Every detail of the horrible drama seems to her a defilement ; her being brought out of the water before all those men, her weary sleep in the station-house, the ribald songs she heard there, the mad woman who warmed herself at the stove, all the

vice, the filth, the wretchedness she mixed with on the commissary's staircase, and moreover, the contempt of some of the glances, the impudence of others, the jokes of her preserver, the gallantries of the police-agent who brought her home, all her womanly modesty for ever destroyed, her name, which she was obliged to give, even the discovery of her infirmity, which accompanied her through all the phases of this long martyrdom, like a mockery, a ridicule of her suicide for love.

She is dying of shame, I tell you. In the delirium of her nights she repeats incessantly: "I am ashamed! I am ashamed!" and in her calmer moments, she hides under the bedclothes, draws them over her face, as though she would bury herself beneath them.

Close to Désirée's bed, in the light of the window, Madame Delobelle works on whilst nursing her daughter. From time to time she raises her eyes to observe this mute despair, this inexplicable malady, then she quickly takes up her work again, for it is one of the greatest afflictions of the poor, that they have no time to suffer. They must work without ceasing, and even when death is hovering round, must think of pressing needs, of the difficulties of life.

The rich man can shut himself up with his sorrow, think of nothing else, can live on it, do only these two things: suffer and weep. The poor man has neither the means nor the right. Near where I lived in the country, I once knew an old woman, who had lost in the same year her daughter and her husband, two terrible trials, one after the other; but there still remained her boys to bring up, a farm to manage. From early dawn it was necessary for her to be on foot, to look after everything, to superintend different labours scattered over fields, sometimes a long way off. This sorrowing widow said to me: "I have not a moment for weeping during the week; but on Sunday, oh! on Sunday, I make up for all!" And in truth, on that day, while the children played outside or went for a walk, she locked herself in, and passed the afternoon in crying and sobbing and calling through the deserted house on her husband and her daughter.

Madame Delobelle had not even her Sunday. Recollect she was the only one there was to work now, and her fingers did not possess the marvellous skill of Désirée's little hands, medicine too was expensive, and nothing in the world would have induced her to suppress even one of the father's cherished luxuries. So

at whatever hour the invalid opened her eyes, she saw her mother in the wan light of early morn, or under the shadow of the evening lamp, working, working unceasingly, and when the curtains of her bed were closed, she heard the metallic click of the scissors replaced on the table. Her mother's fatigue, these vigils that kept perpetual company with her own fever, were also part of her sufferings. Sometimes they overcame all the others.

"Come, give me my work for a few minutes," said she, trying to sit up in her bed. It was a rift in the darkness that was growing thicker every day. The mother, who saw in this invalid's fancy, a wish to return to life, propped her up as comfortably as she could, and drew the table near to her. But the needle was too heavy, the eyes too weak, and the least sound of a carriage rolling over the stones, or of cries rising to the windows, reminded Désirée that the street, the awful street, was there, quite near her. No, decidedly she had not strength to live. Ah! if she could only have died at first, and then have lived again. In the meantime, she was dying, imbued little by little with a feeling of supreme renunciation. Between two stitches the mother watched her child growing day by day paler: "Are you comfortable?" she would ask.

"Quite comfortable," the invalid would reply with a sad little smile which for a moment lighted up her sorrowful face, and showed all the ravages wrought in it, even as a ray of sunshine entering a poor man's dwelling, instead of enlivening it, only renders the sadness and distress more distinct. And then there would be long silences, the mother not daring to speak for fear of weeping: the daughter enfeebled by fever, already enveloped in those invisible veils with which death, by a sort of pity, surrounds those who are about to pass away, in order to subdue what strength remains to them, and so bear them off more gently without their resisting.

The illustrious Delobelle was never there. He had not in any way changed his mode of existence as an actor out of an engagement. Yet he knew his daughter was dying; the doctor had forewarned him. It had even been a terrible blow to him, for at the bottom he dearly loved his child; but in his strange nature the truest and most sincere sentiments found a false and unnatural outlet, by the same law that when a shelf is askew, nothing placed upon it appears to be upright.

Delobelle liked above all to carry his grief about with him

and to exhibit it. He acted the broken-hearted parent from one end of the boulevard to the other. You would meet him hanging about the theatres or in the actors' cafés with red eyes and pale face. He liked to be asked: "Well! poor old boy, how are they getting on at home?" Then he would shake his head in a nervous manner; his grimaces would seem to repress his tears and his lips to withhold imprecations, as he pierced the heavens with a mute regard, fraught with anger, like when he played the *Medecin des enfants*; all of which did not prevent his being full of delicate attentions and kind officiousness for his daughter.

Thus, for instance, since she had been ill, he had fallen into the habit of bringing her home some flowers whenever he went out for a walk; and he was not satisfied with ordinary flowers, with the humble violets that bloom at every street corner for slender purses. He required, in those dull autumn days, roses, carnations, and, above all, white lilac—that hot-house lilac, whose flowers, stalks and leaves are of the same greenish white, as if nature in her haste had confined herself to one uniform colour.

"Oh! it is too much—it is too much—I shall be angry," said the little invalid every time, on seeing him enter triumphantly, bouquet in hand; but he put on such a lordly air as he answered: "Never mind—never mind," that she said no more. Still, it was a great expense, and the poor mother had so much trouble to earn a living for them all.

Far from complaining, Madame Delobelle thought this very grand on the part of her great man. This contempt for money, this superb carelessness filled her with admiration; and she believed more than ever in the genius and the theatrical future of her husband.

He also retained, in the midst of these grave events, an unshakable confidence. Nevertheless, his eyes were at last very nearly opened to the truth. It needed only a tiny fevered hand to place itself on this solemn skull full of illusions, to drive away the bee that had been buzzing there for so long. This is how it came to pass.

One night Désirée woke with a start in a very singular state. It should be mentioned that, on the doctor coming to see her the evening before, he had been much surprised to find her greatly revived and more calm, with all the fever left her. Not understanding the reason of this unexpected recovery, he

had gone away saying: "We must wait," trusting in the vigour of youth, in that strength which often grafts a new life on the very symptoms of death. If he had looked under Désirée's pillow he would have found there a letter bearing the Cairo postmark, which was the secret of this happy change. Four pages signed by Frank, all his conduct explained and confessed to his dear little Zizi.

It was the very letter dreamed of by the sick girl. Had she dictated it herself, she could not have better expressed all the sentiments that went to her heart, all the delicate excuses that served to heal her wounds. Frank was repentant, asked her forgiveness, and without promising her anything, and, above all, without asking anything further of her, he related to his faithful friend his struggles, his remorse and his sufferings. He was indignant with Sidonie, whom he begged Désirée to mistrust; and with a resentment which the old passion rendered clear-sighted and terrible, he spoke to her of that perverse and superficial nature, of that clear voice well fitted for lies, which never suffered itself to be betrayed by one word from the heart, all coming from the head like the passionate transports of this Parisian doll. It was a great misfortune that this letter did not arrive a few days earlier. To Désirée, all these good words were now like those delicious viands brought too late to one dying of hunger. The furnished one inhales them, longs for them, but lacks the strength to swallow them. All day long the invalid re-read her letter. She would draw it from the envelope, then re-fold it with loving care, and with closed eyes still see it all, even down to the very colour of the stamp. Frank had thought of her! That alone brought her delicious repose, in the midst of which she sank to sleep with the impression of a friendly arm supporting her weary head.

Suddenly she awoke in the extraordinary condition already mentioned. It was a weakness, an anguish of her whole being, something inexpressible. It seemed to her that she held to life only by a strained thread, strained almost to the point of breaking, and the nervous vibration of which gave to all her senses a supernatural delicacy and acuteness. It was night. The room in which she was lying—she had been placed in her parents' chamber as more airy and spacious than her own little recess—was almost dark. The night-light cast on the ceiling its luminous rings, that species of Great Bear that occupies the sleepless hours of invalids: and on the table the lamp, veiled

by its shade, lighted up only the scattered work, and the outline of Madame Delobelle dozing in her arm-chair.

Into Désirée's head which seemed to her less heavy than usual, there suddenly came a great throwing together of thoughts and memories. All the remote past of her life seemed to come back to her. The smallest incidents of her childhood, scenes she had not comprehended at the time, words heard as in a dream, recurred to her mind. The poor child was astonished without being frightened. She did not know that before the great annihilation of death, there often comes such a moment of excessive excitement, as if one's whole being urged its faculties and its forces to a final unconscious struggle.

From her bed she could see her father and her mother, the one close to her, the other in the workroom, the door of which was left open. Her mother was stretched in her arm-chair with the prostration that accompanies prolonged fatigue, and all those scars with which time and suffering mark an ageing visage appeared deep-cut and ineffaceable in the relaxation of sleep. During the day one's will, and one's preoccupations place as it were a mask over the true expression of the features ; but night leaves them free. At this moment the deep wrinkles of the courageous woman, her reddened eyelids, the thin white hairs at her temples, the contraction of her poor hands worn with work, were all visible, and Désirée saw all. She would have liked to be strong enough to get up and kiss that dear tranquil brow which the wrinkles furrowed without disfiguring.

In contrast, through the half-open door-way, the illustrious Delobelle appeared to his daughter in one of his favourite attitudes. Seated before the little white table-cloth spread for his supper, he ate, while reading a pamphlet propped up in front of him against the decanter. The great man had just come in—the sound of his footsteps had probably awakened the invalid—and still agitated by the life and action of a fine performance, he was supping alone, gravely, and solemnly buttoned up in his new frock-coat, his napkin under his chin, and his hair touched up with the curling irons.

For the first time in her life Désirée remarked the striking contrast between her worn out mother scantily clad in her thin black dress, and her father so happy, well-fed, idle, tranquil and unconscious. She comprehended the difference between the two existences at a glance.

That routine existence in which children cease to discriminate

accurately, owing to seeing things through one invariable medium, had disappeared for her. In her present state she judged her parents as though from a distance, as if she were imperceptibly separated from them. This second sight of the final hour, proved another torture to her. What would become of them when she was no longer there? Either her mother would overwork herself to death; or the poor woman would be obliged to give over all exertion, and her selfish partner, always absorbed in his theatrical ambitions, would allow them both to slide little by little into pauperism, that dark gulf which enlarges and grows deeper as one descends into it.

And yet he was not a bad man, he had proved that to them many times. Only he had an intense blindness which nothing had been able to dissipate. But if she tried? If, before going away—something told her it would be soon—if before going away she tore aside the thick veil which this wretched man kept so willingly and persistently over his eyes? A gentle loving hand like hers could alone attempt this operation. She alone had the right to say to her father: “Earn your bread—Give up the stage.” Then as time pressed Désirée Delobelle armed herself with all her courage and called softly: “Papa!—Papa!”

At the first call of his child the great man hastened to her. There had been a first night at the Ambigu that evening, and he had returned from it glowing, electrified. The lustres, the applause, the conversation in the corridors, all those exciting details on which he fed his folly had left him more filled with illusions than ever. He entered Désirée’s chamber erect, radiant, superb, his lamp in his hand, a camelia in his button-hole.

“Good evening, Zizi, you are not asleep then?”

And his words had a joyous intonation that sounded singularly amid the sad surroundings. With her hand Désirée made him a sign to stop, pointing to her sleeping mother.

“Put down your lamp. I have something to say to you.”

Her voice shaken with emotion, struck him; and her eyes, so very wide open, and lighted up by a penetrating look that he had never before seen in them, impressed him. A little intimidated he drew near her with the camelia in his hand to offer her, his mouth pleasantly rounded, and with a creaking of new shoes which he considered extremely aristocratic. His pose was evidently embarrassed; and this was no doubt due to the con-

trast existing between the well-lit and noisy interior of the theatre that he had just quitted, and the little sick-chamber where the deadened sounds and the lowered lights died away in a fevered atmosphere.

"What's the matter, darling?" said he. "Do you feel worse?"

By a movement of her pale little head Désirée replied that she did feel ill, and that she wished to speak to him close, quite close. As soon as he was near enough to her pillow, she placed her burning hand on the arm of the great man and whispered softly in his ear—She was very ill, altogether ill: she understood quite well that she had not long to live.

"Then, father, you will find yourself all alone with mamma.—Do not tremble like that—you knew that it was coming—and very soon—only I want to tell you—I fear when I am gone, I greatly fear that mamma will not be strong enough to provide for all.—Look how pale and worn she is."

The actor looked at his "sainted wife," and appeared greatly surprised to find her looking so ill. Then he consoled himself with the egotistical remark: "She never was very strong."

This observation and the tone in which it was uttered, made Désirée indignant and strengthened her in her resolution. She continued, without pity for the actor's illusions:

"What will become of you both when I am gone? Oh yes, I know,—you have great hopes, but they are very long in being realised. The results you have expected for so many years may be still delayed; and while waiting, what will you do?—Listen, my dear-father, I don't wish to give you pain, but it seems to me that at your age, intelligent as you are, it would be easy—M. Risler would be very pleased, I am sure—"

She spoke slowly with great effort, seeking for words, and with long intervals between each phrase which she always hoped to see filled up by a gesture or an exclamation from her father. But the actor did not comprehend. He listened, looking at her with his great eyes wide open feeling vaguely that in the conscience of this innocent and inexorable child, some accusation was levelled against him; but what it was, he knew not.

"I think you would do well," continued Désirée timidly, "I think you would do well to give up—"

"Eh! what? How!"

She paused on seeing the effect of her words. The mobile face of the old actor was suddenly drawn up under the impression

of a violent despair, and tears, real tears, which he did not even think of pretending to brush away with the back of his hand as they do on the stage, welled up under his eyelids without falling, so great was his grief.

The unhappy man began to comprehend now. Of the only two admirers that had remained true to him, one was now turning away from his glory. His daughter no longer believed in him? It was not possible! He had misunderstood, he had not heard aright. Come, come, what was it that he had better give up? But before the mute appeal of his look asking for mercy Désirée had not the courage to finish. Besides the poor child was at the end of her strength and of her life.

She murmured two or three times: "To give up—to give up."

Then her little head fell back on the pillow, and she died without having dared to say to him what it was that he had better give up.

The prisoner Delobelle is dead, M. Commissary. Did not I tell you she would never do it again? This time death has spared her the distance and the trouble; he has come to fetch her himself. And now, incredulous man, four good deal planks, strongly nailed, will serve as guarantee for the child's word. She promised never to do it again, she never will.

The little cripple is dead. This is the latest news in the Francs-Bourgeois quarter, greatly excited by this doleful event. Not that Désirée was very popular there—she who never went out and only showed herself from time to time at the dull windows, her face having the paleness of a recluse and the dark ringed eyes of an indefatigable worker. At the funeral of the daughter of the illustrious Delobelle there could not fail to be many actors, and Paris adores such people. She loves to see these idols of the night pass through the street in open daylight, to mark their true physiognomy free from the enchantment of the stage. Therefore, on this morning while the white draperies were being nailed up with noisy hammer strokes under the narrow doorway of the Rue du Braque, the curious crowd the foot pavement and the road.

To do them justice, actors entertain a friendly feeling towards one another, or, at any rate, are held together by a solidarity, a professional bond that unites them on all occasions of outward manifestation, such as balls, concerts, dinners, funerals.

Although the illustrious Delobelle was no longer attached to any theatre, though his name had not appeared in dramatic

criticisms or playbills for more than fifteen years, it only needed a little note of two lines in an obscure theatrical journal—"M. Delobelle formerly leading actor at the theatres of Metz and Alençon has just had the affliction, &c. Friends will assemble, &c—" for actors to flock at once in crowds from all corners of Paris and the environs in answer to this appeal.

Famous or not famous, celebrated or unknown, they were all there, those who had played with Delobelle in the provinces and those who had met him in theatrical cafés where his face was one of those continually seen—a face it is difficult to name, but the owner of which one remembers on account of the customary surroundings, of which it seems to form a part. There were also some provincial actors, staying in Paris hoping to ensnare a manager to procure a good engagement.

And all of them, obscure and celebrated, Parisians and provincials, had but one wish—to see their name mentioned by some newspaper in a report of the funeral. For all kinds of publicity seem desirable to these creatures of vanity. They are so afraid that the public will forget them, that directly they are out of an engagement they feel the need of getting themselves talked about, of recalling themselves by every possible means to the memory of Parisian fashion so short-lived and so fleeting.

Ever since nine o'clock, all the poorer people of that gossiping province, the Marais, were waiting at the windows, at the doors, or in the street to see the actors pass. Artisans watched at the grimy windows of their workshops, petty shopkeepers peeped from behind their curtains, housewives lingered with baskets on their arms, and apprentices with parcels on their heads.

At last they arrived in carriages, or on foot, alone or in groups. One recognised them by their clean shaven faces—blue about the chin and cheeks, by their artificial manners—too emphatic or too simple, by their conventional gestures, and especially by that overflow of sentimentality caused by the exaggeration necessary to the perspective of the stage. The various ways in which these good fellows manifested their feelings under such dolorous circumstances were curious to observe. Each entrance into the little dark court-yard of the house of death was like an entrance on the stage, varied according to the style of the actor. The leading gentleman with a fatalistic air, and frowning brow, began by brushing away from the corner of his eye the tear he could no longer retain with his glove, then with

a sigh he looked up to heaven and stood erect in the middle of the stage, that is to say of the court-yard, his hat on his hip, and with a little tapping of the left foot which helped him to restrain his sorrow.—“Be still, my heart, be still.” The comic actors, on the contrary, affecting simplicity, accosted one another with a pitiful and good-natured air, called each other “old man,” with earnest and quivering grasps of the hands, flabby tremblings in the lower part of the cheeks, and a depression of the corners of the eyes and of the lips which lowered their affliction to the trivial expression of farce. All were affected, yet all were sincere.

As soon as they arrived these gentlemen formed themselves into two camps. The celebrated and successful actors regarded disdainfully the unknown and seedy Robricarts, whose envy responded to the contempt of the other by a thousand disparaging remarks. “Do you see how So-and-so has aged, how dreadfully he is wrinkled? He will not be able to perform much longer.”

Between these two groups the illustrious Delobelle, scrupulously attired in black, came and went with red eyes and close shut teeth, distributing silent grasps of the hand. The poor devil’s heart was full, but that had not prevented him from having his hair curled for the occasion. Strange nature! No one reading his heart could have said where true sorrow and its counterfeit separated, they were so intermingled one with the other.

Among the actors there were several persons already known to us: M. Chêbe, more important than ever, who hung about the more noted performers with an eager air, while Madame Chêbe remained above with the poor mother. Sidonie had not been able to come, but Risler was there, almost as afflicted as the father, the good Risler, the friend in need, who had paid all the expenses of this sad ceremony. For this reason the mourning coaches were superb, the hangings about the doorway fringed with silver, the pall strewn with white roses and white violets. In the dark and wretched Rue de Braque this modest white in the soft light of the tapers, these trembling flowers sprinkled with holy water, were suggestive of the fate of the poor child whose least smiles had always been bedewed with tears.

At last the procession started, pacing slowly step by step through the winding streets. Delobelle walked at the head

convulsed with sobs, weeping almost as much over himself—a poor father burying his child—as over his dead daughter, and retaining at the bottom of his sincere sorrow his eternal vain personality, just as a stone at the bottom of a brook remains immovable under the shifting waters. The pomp of the ceremony, the mournful procession that stopped all circulation on its road, the draped carriages, Risler's little brougham, which Sidonie had sent in order to do the 'proper thing,'—all this flattered and exalted him in spite of what he suffered. Of a sudden, being unable to restrain himself any longer, he leaned towards Robicart, who was walking beside him, saying, "Did you notice?"

"What?"

And the unhappy father, wiping his eyes, murmured, not without a feeling of pride, "There are two private carriages following."

Dear little Zizi, so good and so simple! All these affected sorrows, this train of solemn mourners, were hardly made for her.

Up above, at the workroom window, Madame Delobelle, whom they had not been able to prevent watching the departure of her little one, was standing behind the closed shutters. "Adieu, adieu," murmured the poor mother, almost to herself, waving her hand with the unconscious gesture of old age or madness.

Softly as this adieu was uttered, Désirée Delobelle must have heard it.

BOOK IV.

CHAPTER I.

THE FANTASTIC LEGEND OF THE LITTLE BLUE MAN.

You are quite at liberty not to do so, but, for my part, I firmly believe in the little blue man. Not that I have ever seen him, but one of my friends, a poet, in whom I have full confidence, has often told me about finding himself one night face to face with this strange little gnome. These are the circumstances.

My friend had had the weakness to give a bill to his tailor, and, as is the case with all men of imagination under the circumstances, as soon as the signature was given, he fancied himself freed from his debt, and the idea of his bill fled quite from his mind. Now it happened that one night our poet was awakened by a singular sound coming from his chimney. He thought at first that it was some chilly sparrow seeking the warmth of the smouldering fire, or some sullen weathercock veered by the changing wind. But after a moment or so the sound became more distinct, and he clearly heard the jingling of a bag of silver, mingled with a rattling of chains. At the same time he heard a small voice, sharp as the distant whistle of a locomotive, clear as a cock's crow, call to him from the roof above: "The day of reckoning! the day of reckoning!"

"Oh! dear me, that bill!" said the poor fellow, suddenly remembering that his tailor's acceptance would fall due in eight days; and until morning he did nothing but toss about, seeking sleep in all the corners of his bed, and finding only thoughts of that confounded promissory note. The next night, the night after, and every following night, he was awakened at the same hour and in the same way; always the jingling of coin, the rattling of a chain, and the small voice that cried with a sneering laugh: "The day of reckoning! the day of reckoning!" The most terrible part of it was, that the nearer the day of reckoning approached the sharper and more ferocious

became the cry, sounding full of threats, of summonses, and executions.

Unfortunate poet ! the fatigues of the day, spent in rushing about the town to procure the money were not enough ; this cruel little voice must also come and prevent all slumber and repose. To whom did it belong then, this fantastic voice ? What malicious spirit could be amusing itself by subjecting him to this martyrdom ? He wished to be clear about this. So one night, instead of going to bed, he put out his light, opened his window, and waited.

I need not tell you that in his capacity of a lyric poet, my friend lodged very high up, almost on a level with the leads. For hours he saw nothing but that picturesque stretch of crowded roofs, sloping one towards the other, which the streets traversed in all directions like immense precipices, and which the chimney-pots and gables, lit up by the moon's rays, capriciously varied. Above dark and sleeping Paris this formed as it were a second town, an aerial city, floating suspended between the region of shadows and the dazzling light of the moon.

My friend waited, waited for a long time. At last towards two or three o'clock in the morning, when all the steeples towering aloft in the night passed the hour one to the other, a light step sounded near him running over the tiles and slates, and a shrill little voice whispered down his chimney-pot, "The day of reckoning ! the day of reckoning !" Then leaning out a little my poet perceived the infamous little hobgoblin tormentor of mankind, who had prevented him from sleeping for a week. He was not able to describe his size positively to me, the moon plays you such pranks by the fantastic dimensions it gives to objects and to their shadows. He only remarked that this singular little imp was dressed like a messenger of the Bank of France in a blue coat with silver buttons, cocked hat, sergeant's stripes on his sleeves, and that he held under his arm a leather portfolio almost as large as himself, and the key of which suspended by a long chain rattled frantically at every step, as did the wallet full of silver which he shook in his other hand. It was thus that my friend had a glimpse of the little blue man as he passed rapidly by on a ray of moonlight, for he seemed in a great hurry, very busy, striding over the streets at a bound, running from one chimney to another and gliding along the parapets of the roofs.

This infernal little man's customers are so numerous. There

are so many tradesmen in Paris, so many people who have a pay-day at the end of the month, so many unhappy beings who have signed a promissory note, or written the word "accepted" across a bill of exchange. To all these people the little blue man uttered as he passed his warning note. He cried it above the factories, at this hour empty and silent, above the great mansions of finance, sleeping in the luxurious silence of their gardens, above those houses of five or six stories, with unequal roofs, which crowd all the poorer quarters. "The day of reckoning! the day of reckoning!" From one end of the city to the other, in that crystal atmosphere, which at a certain altitude accompanies great cold and a bright moon, the little strident voice sounded pitilessly. Everywhere on his passage he chased away sleep; awoke inquietude, troubled the thoughts and fatigued the eyes, and from the top to the bottom of the houses of Paris spread, as it were, a vague shiver of anxiety and banished all repose.

Think what you please of this legend, but I can assure you, in support of the story of my poet, that one night towards the end of January, Sigismond the old cashier of the house of Fromont and Risler was suddenly awakened in his little dwelling at Montrouge by the same vexatious voice and the same rattling of chains, followed by this fatal cry: "The day of reckoning!"

"That's true, though," thought the good man, starting right up in his bed, "the day after to-morrow is the end of the month—And I have the courage to sleep!"

In fact a considerable sum was in question, a hundred thousand francs to be paid in two drafts, and at a moment when, for the first time for thirty years, the strong box of the firm of Fromont was entirely empty.

What was to be done? Several times Sigismond had endeavoured to speak to young Fromont on the subject, but the latter seemed to shun the heavy responsibility of business, always passing through the counting-house in a feverish hurry, without seeing or hearing anything going on around him. To the uneasy questions of the cashier he replied, biting his little moustache: "All right, all right, my good Planus. Don't be uneasy. I will attend to it." When saying this, he seemed to be thinking of something altogether different, to be, in fact, miles away from what was passing around him. The rumour ran through the factory, where his passion for Madame Risler

was no longer a secret, that Sîdonie was deceiving him and making him very miserable ; and certainly the follies of his mistress pre-occupied his mind much more than the uneasiness of his cashier. As for Risler, he was never seen ; he passed his life shut up in the attics, superintending the mysterious and interminable fabrication of his machine.

This indifference, on the part of the masters, to the business of the factory, this absolute want of supervision had led, little by little, to a general disorganisation. Workmen and clerks took things easily, came late to their work and slipped away early, without attending to the old bell which, after having regulated the work for so long, seemed now to ring out alarm and overthrow. The business still went on, because a house well started goes along for years by the force of the first impulsion, but what a muddle, what confusion existed beneath this apparent prosperity !

Sigismond knew this better than any one else, and that is why the cry of the little blue man had brusquely waked him from his sleep. As if to see more clearly into this host of sorrowful ideas that crowded, danced and swam before him, the cashier had lighted his candle, and seated on his bed he thought—where to find these hundred thousand francs ? Certainly there was more than that owing to the house. There were old unsettled bills among the customers, rag ends of accounts with the Prochassons and others ; but what a humiliation it would be for him to go and collect all these outstanding old accounts. Such things are not done in great commercial houses ; they would lower the position of a firm. And yet that would be preferable to having one's bills protested. Oh ! the idea that the bank clerk would come up to his wicket with an assured and confident air, that he would lay his bills calmly on the counter, and that he, Planus, Sigismond Planus, would be obliged to say to him : "Take back your bills. I have no money to meet them with."

No, no ; it was impossible. Any humiliation was preferable to that. "Yes, it is settled.—I will go round money-hunting to-morrow," sighed the poor cashier.

And while he tossed and turned, and worried himself thus without being able to close his eyes till morning, the little blue man, continuing his rounds, went to shake his bag of money and his chain above a roof of the Boulevard Beaumarchais, where, since Désirée's death, the illustrious Delobelle had gone

to live with his wife. "The day of reckoning! the day of reckoning!"

Alas, the little cripple had not been mistaken in her predictions. She gone, Madame Delobelle had not been able to carry on the bird and insect business for long. Her eyes were blinded with tears, and her old hands trembled too much for her to daintily pose the humming-birds, which, in spite of all her efforts, maintained a piteous and doleful expression. She had been obliged to give it up. Then the courageous woman tried needlework. She repaired lace and embroidery, descending by degrees to the level of a workwoman. But her earnings getting less and less, hardly sufficed for the barest necessities of the household, and Delobelle, whose terrible profession of an actor *in partibus* forced him into continual expenses, was obliged to run into debt. He owed money to his tailor, to his bootmaker, to his hosier; but what troubled him most were those famous luncheons he had partaken of at the time of his management. The bill amounted to ten pounds, payable at the end of January; and this time without any hope of renewal, so that the cry of the little blue man sent a thrill of terror through all his limbs.

Only one day to the day of reckoning! Only one day to find ten pounds in! If he did not find the money, all that they possessed would be sold off. All the poor furniture they had had since they commenced housekeeping—insufficient, incommensurable, but endeared to them on account of the memories attached to its many scars, its frayed, worn edges—would be sold off. They would sell the long work-table so often covered with birds and insects, at the end of which Delobelle had supped during twenty years; they would sell, too, Zizi's great arm-chair which even now the mother could hardly look at without tears, and which seemed to have preserved something of the dear one herself, of her gestures and attitudes, the wearisomeness of her long days of reverie and labour. Madame Delobelle would certainly die if these dear memorials were taken from her.

Thinking of this, the unhappy actor, whose dense egotism did not always save him from the stings of remorse, turned over and over in his bed, giving vent to deep sighs; and all the time he had before his eyes Désirée's little pale face, wearing that beseeching and tender look which she turned so anxiously towards him at the moment of death, when in a low voice she

asked him "to give up—to give up—" What was it that she wished her father to give up? She had died without being able to say; but none the less Delobelle had partially understood, and since then a trouble and a doubt, that mingled cruelly that night with his pecuniary difficulties, had crept into his pitiless nature.

"The day of reckoning! the day of reckoning!" This time it was down M. Chèbe's chimney that the little blue man sent this sinister cry in passing.

You must know that M. Chèbe for some time past had launched out into considerable ventures, an "out-door" trade—vague, exceedingly vague—but which nevertheless swallowed up a great deal of money. On several occasions Risler and Sidonie had been obliged to pay their father's debts on the express condition that he would remain quiet and not attempt to do any more business. * But these perpetual plunges were necessary to his existence. Every time he acquired renewed vigour from them, fresh courage, more ardent activity. When he had no money M. Chèbe gave his signature; indeed he indulged in a deplorable abuse of his signature, reckoning always on the profits of the enterprise to meet his engagements. But the deuce of it was that these profits never made their appearance, whilst the accepted bills, after circulating for months from one end of Paris to the other, returned home with exasperating punctuality, scored over with hieroglyphic endorsements which they had picked up on the way.

Now his January engagements happened to be very heavy, and on hearing the little blue man pass by he suddenly remembered that he had not a sou to meet them with. Oh, agony! he would again have to humiliate himself before Risler, run the risk of a refusal, and confess that he had broken his word. The anguish of the poor devil in thinking of these things was augmented by the silence of the night, when the eyes are unoccupied, when one's thoughts have nothing to distract the attention from them, and, moreover, by one's horizontal position which, by affording complete immobility to the entire body, leaves the mind defenceless against its terrors and preoccupations. Every minute M. Chèbe relighted his lamp, took up his newspaper and vainly tried to read, to the great annoyance of good Madame Chèbe who groaned softly and turned to the wall to avoid the light.

And during all this time the infernal little blue man, en-

chanted with his malice, went jeering away to jingle his bag of money and his chain a little further off. Behold him in the Rue des Vieilles-Haudriettes above a large factory where all the windows are dark except one on the first floor at the bottom of the garden.

In spite of the late hour George Fromont had not yet gone to bed. Seated by the fireside, his head between his hands, in the blind, dumb concentration of irreparable misfortune, he thought of Sidonie, that horrible Sidonie asleep on the floor above. She was positively driving him mad. She was deceiving him, he was sure of it, she preferred the tenor Cazabon, alias, Cazaboni, whom Madame Dobson had introduced into the house. For a long time he had implored her not to receive this man, but Sidonie would not listen, and that very day, speaking of a grand ball she was about to give, she declared that nothing should prevent her from inviting the tenor. "Then he is your lover!" George had cried in anger, with his eyes fixed on hers.

She had not said no; she had not even turned away her eyes, only with perfect coolness and her wicked little smile she had given him to understand that she recognised nobody's right to criticise or to restrain her actions, that she was free and meant to remain so, and did not intend to be tyrannised over by him any more than she was by Risler. They had passed an hour thus in the carriage with the blinds drawn down, quarrelling, insulting one another, almost fighting in fact.

And to think that it was for this woman he had sacrificed everything—his fortune, his honour, even the beautiful Clara sleeping with their child in the adjoining room—complete happiness within reach of his hand, and all of which he had disdained for the sake of this hussy. Now she had acknowledged to him that she loved him no longer, that she loved another. And he, the coward, he coveted her yet. What potent philter had she then given him to drink?

Carried away by the indignation that boiled over in his entire being, George Fromont sprang from his chair, and paced feverishly about the room, his footsteps resounding throughout the quiet house, the embodiment as it were of sleepless nights. The other was asleep upstairs. She was sleeping with the prerogative of her unconscious and remorseless nature. Perhaps too she was thinking of her Cazaboni.

When this idea crossed his mind George felt a wild temptation to go upstairs to awaken Risler, to tell him everything, and

to be for ever lost with her. But this unsuspecting husband was too stupid. Why did he not look after her more? She was pretty enough, and above all vicious enough, to require precautions to be taken.

And it was whilst he struggled oppressed by these cruel and fruitless thoughts that the little blue man's cry of alarm sounded suddenly amidst the noise of the wind. "The day of reckoning! the day of reckoning!"

Unhappy man! In his anger he had quite forgotten it; and yet for a long time he had seen this terrible end of January coming. How often between two appointments when his thoughts, free for a moment from Sidonie, returned to business, to the realities of life—how often had he not said to himself: "That day means the final break up." But like all who live in the delirium of frenzy, his cowardice made him believe that it was too late for reparation, and he set out again, faster and more determined, on the evil road in order to forget, to stupefy himself.

At this hour he had no longer any means of stupefying himself. He saw his disaster clearly, to the very bottom, and the hard and serious face of Sigismond Planus rose before him, with its rough hewn features, the stiffness of which no expression mitigated, and his clear German Swiss eyes which for a long time had followed him with such an impassable look. Ah! well, he had not these hundred thousand francs, and he did not know where to get them. For six months past, in order to satisfy the ruinous fancies of his mistress, he had played heavily and had lost enormous sums. Besides that, there was the failure of a banker and a pitiable balance sheet!—Nothing remained to him but the factory, and in what a state this was!

Where could he go now, and what could he do?

That which but a few hours before had seemed a chaos to him, a whirlpool wherein he saw nothing distinctly, and the very confusion of which even was a kind of hope, appeared to him at this moment with frightful clearness, empty cash-boxes, closed doors, protested bills, ruin. That is what he saw on whichever side he turned. And as to all this was added the faithlessness of Sidonie, the unhappy man, distracted, not knowing what to cling to amidst this frightful wreck, suddenly uttered a cry of anguish, a sob, like an appeal to some Providence.

"George! George! whatever is the matter?" His wife

stood before him, his wife who now waited up for him every night, watching anxiously for his return from his club, for she still believed he spent all his evenings there. Seeing her husband change and grow more gloomy from day to day, Clara fancied he must have some great pecuniary trouble—losses at play, no doubt. She had been given to understand that he played a great deal, and spite of his indifference towards her, she was uneasy about him and wished he would make her his confidant, that he would give her the opportunity to show herself generous and kind.

This night she heard him walking about in his room very late. As her little daughter was coughing a great deal and needed constant attention, she divided her solicitude between the sufferings of the child and those of the father. And she had remained with her ears open to every sound in one of those affectionate and sorrowful vigils during which women assemble all the courage they possess to support the heavy weight of multiplied duties. At last the child slept, and hearing the father's cry Clara hastened to him.

Oh! when he saw her before him so tender, so moved, so beautiful, what a great and tardy remorse overcame him. Yes, she was indeed the true companion, the friend! How could he ever have abandoned her? For a long, long time he wept upon her shoulder without being able to utter a word. And it was fortunate he could not speak or he would have told her all, all! The unhappy man had need to unburthen his mind, he felt an irresistible desire to accuse himself, to implore pardon, to diminish the weight of the remorse that was crushing his heart.

She spared him the pain of saying a word: "You have been playing, haven't you, and have lost a great deal?"

He made a sign in the affirmative; then when he was able to speak he confessed that a hundred thousand francs had to be found by the day after the morrow, and that he did not know how to obtain them.

She did not utter a single reproach. She was one of those women who in face of an evil think only of repairing it without indulging in the least recrimination. At the bottom of her heart she even blessed the disaster which drew him to her side and became a link between their two existences, so long separated. She reflected a moment, then with the strength of a determination which it cost her much pain to form she said:

"Nothing is lost as yet. I will go to-morrow to Savigny and ask grandpapa for the money."

Never would he have dared to suggest such a thing to her, he had not even thought of it. She was so proud, and old Gardinois so hard. Certainly she was making a great sacrifice, which was a striking proof to him of the love she bore him. All at once he was penetrated by that warmth of heart, that lightness of spirit which comes over one after an escape from danger. Clara appeared to him a supernatural being who had the gift of goodness and consolation, just as the other one upstairs had the gift of madness and destruction. Willingly would he have gone on his knees before this fair form, her black hair magnificently wreathed for the night, surrounded with a glistening bluish nimbus, and the somewhat severe regularity of whose features melted into an exquisite expression of tenderness.

"Clara, Clara, how good you are!" he exclaimed.

Without replying she led him to the cradle of their child. "Kiss her," said she softly. They were there close to each other, lost as it were in the muslin curtains, with their heads bent over the sleeping child who was still slightly panting from the shocks of her illness, and George, fearing to wake his daughter, embraced the mother passionately.

This was certainly the first time such an effect as this had been produced in a household by the apparition of the little blue man. Generally, wherever this frightful little gnome passes he unlinks hearts and hands, and turns the soul away from its dearest affections by impregnating it with a thousand inquietudes aroused by the rattling of his chain and his sinister cry above the roof tops: "The day of reckoning! the day of reckoning!"

CHAPTER II.

REVELATIONS.

“Ан! here’s Sigismond; how are you, Sigismond? And business! Are things going on well with you?”

The old cashier smiled in a good-natured way, shook hands with the master, his wife, and his brother, and while speaking, glanced curiously around him. He was in a manufactory of paper-hangings, in the Faubourg Saint Antoine, belonging to those little Prochassons, whose rivalry was beginning to be formidable. These former clerks of the Fromonts, starting in business on their own account, had begun in a very small way, and little by little had acquired a certain position in the trade. Uncle Fromont had for a long time backed them with his credit and his money, which had led to amicable relations between the two firms, and also to an unsettled balance—some ten or fifteen thousand francs—which had never been definitively arranged, for money was perfectly safe in the Prochassons’ hands.

The appearance of their factory was certainly encouraging. The chimneys proudly waved their smoky plumes. The dull murmur of labour satisfied one that the workrooms were full, and that business was brisk. The buildings were in good order, the windows bright, everything wore an aspect of animation, good humour, and discipline; and behind the wire-lattice of the cashier’s office, the wife of one of the brothers—simply dressed, and with a look of authority on her young face—was seated, attentive and collected, reckoning up long columns of figures.

Old Sigismond thought bitterly to himself, of the difference that existed between the firm of Fromont, once so opulent, and now living only on its former reputation, and the ever-increasing prosperity of the establishment before his eyes. His prying look darted into the farthest corners, seeking for a fault, for something to criticise; and as he found nothing, this weighed

on his heart, and gave to his smile a false and uneasy expression.

What especially embarrassed him, was the way in which he should set about claiming the money due to his employers, without exposing the state of his cash-box. The poor man assumed a careless disengaged air that was really distressing. Business was going on well, very well—He was in the neighbourhood by chance, and thought he would just look in—That was quite natural, wasn't it? One likes to see old friends.

But these preambles, this beating about the bush, did not lead him to the point he wished to reach; on the contrary, they made him drift farther and farther away from it, and thinking he divined something like astonishment in the eyes of those listening to him, he became confused, stammered, lost his head, then as a last resource, took up his hat, and made a show of going. At the door he stopped suddenly. "Ah! by the bye," said he, "as I am here——"

And he gave a little wink that he thought sly, but which was simply painful. "As I am here, suppose we just settle that old account."

The two brothers and the young wife, seated at the cashier's place, looked at each other for a second, without comprehending what Sigismond meant. "Account! What account?" And all three burst into a hearty laugh, as if at some good joke of the old cashier's. "Get along with you, Father Planus!" The old man laughed too. He laughed, without having the least mind for it, in order not to be behind the others.

At last they explained that George Fromont had himself called, six months before, to draw the money remaining due from them. Sigismond felt ready to drop, but he had sufficient self-possession to answer: "Ah, yes! that's true. I had forgotten it. Ah! decidedly, Sigismond Planus is growing old. I am breaking up, my children. I am breaking up."

And the honest man went away, wiping his eyes where the tears—forced into them by that hearty fit of laughter he had just indulged in—still lingered. His back turned, the young people looked at each other, shaking their heads. They had understood it all.

The force of the blow he had received had been so terrible, that the cashier, once outside, was obliged to sit down on a bench. This, then, was the reason George no longer borrowed money from the cash-box. He collected the accounts himself.

The same thing that had occurred with the Prochassons had, no doubt, taken place with every one else. So it was quite useless for him to expose himself to fresh humiliations. Yes; but the day of reckoning! the day of reckoning! This thought inspired him with renewed fortitude. He wiped his brow, which was moist with perspiration, and set out again to make one more attempt on another customer in that neighbourhood. Only this time he took his precautions, and from the threshold, without even entering, he cried to the cashier: "Good-day, Mr. So-and-so. I want a little bit of information, if you please."

He held the door half open, with his hand on the handle. "At what date was our last account settled? I have forgotten to make a note of it."

Oh! it was a long time ago, a very long time ago that their account had been paid. The receipt of young Fromont was dated September—five months ago. The door was closed quickly. This was number two! Evidently it would be the same everywhere.

"Ah! Monsieur Chorche, Monsieur Chorche," murmured poor Sigismond; and as he continued his pilgrimage, with bent back and trembling limbs, Madame Fromont's carriage passed quite close to him, going towards the terminus of the Orleans railway. But Clara did not see old Planus any more than she had just previously seen the long frock coat of M. Chébe, or the opera hat of the illustrious Delobelle—two other martyrs of the day of reckoning—turning a corner of the Rue des Vieilles-Haudriettes, with the factory and the purse of Risler for their object. The young woman was too much preoccupied with her own undertaking to notice anything in the street.

Only think of it! It was frightful to have to ask a hundred thousand francs of M. Gardinois, a man who boasted of never having borrowed or lent a sou in his life: who related on all occasions, that once only, having been obliged to borrow forty francs from his father to buy a pair of trousers, he had repaid the money piecemeal. With everybody, even with his children, old Gardinois carried out those traditions of rapacity that the soil—the soil hard and often ungrateful to its cultivators—seems to inculcate in the minds of peasants. The worthy man was determined that, during his lifetime, nothing of his colossal fortune should pass into his family's hands. "They will get my property when I am dead," he often remarked.

Following this principle, he had given his daughter, Madame Fromont senior, in marriage without the smallest dowry, and, later on, could not forgive his son-in-law for having made a fortune without any assistance from him. For it was another peculiarity of this nature, as vain as it was selfish, to desire that every one should have need of him, should bow down before his money. When the Fromonts rejoiced in his presence at the happy turn their affairs were taking, his little blue eyes, sharp and cunning, twinkled ironically, and he would remark, with an intonation that made them shudder—"We shall see in the end." Sometimes, too, in the evening at Savigny, when the park, the avenues, the blue slate roof of the château, the ruddy brickwork of the stables, the ponds and pieces of water were all shining, bathed in the golden glory of a fine sunset, this strange parvenu, after a look around, would say aloud before his children: "What consoles me when it's my turn to die, is that no one else in this family will be rich enough to retain a château which costs fifty thousand francs a year to keep up."

Still, with that after-growth of affection, which even the hardest of grandfathers find at the bottom of their hearts, old Gardinois would willingly have petted his granddaughter. But Clara, when a child, had felt an invincible antipathy to the coldness of heart and boastful egotism of the old peasant. When, too, affection does not link those whom differences of education separate, their antipathy to each other is increased through a thousand trifles. At the time of Clara's marriage with George, the old man had said to Madame Fromont: "If your daughter likes, I will give her a princely wedding present; but she must ask for it."

Clara, however, would ask for nothing, and so she received nothing.

What a punishment it was for her to have to come three years afterwards to beg a hundred thousand francs from the generosity she had formerly disdained; to come and humiliate herself, to face endless sermons and stupid sneers, seasoned with provincial jokes, with local sayings, with those proverbs invented by narrow but logical minds, and generally just enough, but which in their trivial language wound like the insult of an inferior.

Poor Clara! her husband and her father would be humiliated in her person. She would be forced to confess the failure of the one, the downfall of the firm which the other had founded,

and of which he had been so proud during his lifetime. The thought that she would have to defend all she loved most in the world was at once her strength and her weakness.

It was eleven o'clock when she reached Savigny. As she had sent no notice of her visit, there was no carriage at the station to meet her, and so she had to walk. The day was sharp and the road dry and hard. The north-east wind blew keenly across the bare plains and over the river where it swept without obstruction through the trees and the leafless underwood. Under the lowering sky, the château was seen with the long line of low walls and hedges that separated it from the surrounding fields. The slates of the roof were as dull as the sky they reflected, and all this magnificent summer residence, transformed by winter, grim, silent, without a leaf on its trees or a pigeon on its roofs, seemed to have retained nothing of life but the quivering ripples of its pieces of water and the lament of its great poplars which bent one towards the other, shaking the magpies' nests built in their summits.

From a distance Clara recognised that the home of her youth bore a harsh and sad air. It seemed to her that Savigny viewed her approach with the same cold and aristocratic aspect that it wore for the passers-by who stopped before the lance-shaped railings of its gates.

A cruel aspect of things ! And yet no, not so cruel, for with the air of a house shut up Savigny seemed to say to her : " Go away, do not enter." And if Clara had been inclined to listen to it, and renouncing her project of speaking to her grandfather, had returned quickly to Paris, she might have preserved the peace of her life. But she did not understand, poor child, and already the great Newfoundland which had recognised her, came bounding along amid the dead leaves and whimpered at the entrance gate.

" Good morning, Frances—where is grandpapa ? " she asked of the gardener's wife, who came to open the door, humble, deceitful, trembling, like all the servants of the château when they felt themselves under the master's eye.

Grandpapa was in his study, a little pavilion, detached from the body of the building, where he passed his days rummaging over and rearranging his papers, amidst nests of drawers, pigeon-holes and great green-backed account books, with a mania for order derived from his early ignorance and the fantastic impression which the village notary's office had formerly made

upon him. At that moment he was shut up there with his gamekeeper, a kind of local spy or hired informer, who kept him well posted about all that went on and all that was said in the little district. He was his master's favourite. His name was Fouinat, which means the marten, and he had the flattened, crafty, sanguinary head of his namesake.

On seeing his granddaughter enter, pale and trembling beneath her furs, the old man comprehended that something grave and unusual had happened, and made a sign to Fouinat who disappeared, gliding through the half open doorway as if he had passed through the wall itself.

"What's up, child? You look quite bowled over," said Grandpapa Gardinois, seated at his immense table.

Her rapid walk in the cold air of the plain, the effort she had made to get there, imparted an unaccustomed expression to her countenance, which was less composed than usual. Without the least invitation in the world on his part, she came and kissed him and seated herself before the fire, where logs covered with dry moss, and fir-apples collected in the park were burning briskly with a splintering sound. She did not even wait to shake away the sleet collected in pearls upon her veil, but spoke at once—faithful to her resolution of stating, as soon as she entered, the motive of her visit, before allowing herself to be affected by the atmosphere of fear and respect which surrounded her grandfather, and made him a sort of dreaded deity.

She needed all her courage not to falter nor to be interrupted by the keen look the old man fastened on her—a look which at her first words became animated with a wicked joy,—nor by the grim mouth whose tightened corners seemed closed by a determined silence, an obstinate resolve, a negation of all sensibility. She went on without taking breath straight to the end, respectful without humility, hiding her emotion and rendering her voice firm by a conviction of the truth of her story. Really, to see them thus in presence of each other, he cold, tranquil, stretched in his arm-chair, with his hands in the pockets of his grey woollen jacket, she mindful of the least word she uttered, as if each one had the power of condemning or absolving her, never would any one have deemed her to be a child in presence of her grandfather, but rather a prisoner before her judge.

His thoughts were wholly centred in the joy and pride of his

triumph. Behold them conquered at last, these proud Fromonts! They still had need then of old Gardinois! His vanity, his dominant passion, overflowed in spite of himself in his whole attitude. When she had done he spoke in his turn, beginning naturally with, "I was sure of it—I always said so—I knew quite well what the end would be," and continuing in the same common-place offensive tone, to end by declaring that, "having regard to his principles, which were well known to his family," he would not lend a sou. Then Clara spoke of her child, of the good name of her husband, which was at the same time the name of her father, and which would be dishonoured. The old man remained as cold and as implacable as ever, and profited by her humiliation to humiliate her still more, for he was of that race of country folk who, when their enemy is down, never quit him without leaving the marks of the nails in their boots imprinted on his face.

"All I can say, little one, is that Savigny is open to you. Let your husband come here. I want a secretary. George can see to my papers, and I'll give him twelve hundred francs a year and feed the whole lot of you. Offer him this from me and come."

She rose indignant. She had come as his granddaughter and he received her like a beggar. Thank God! they had not come to that yet.

"D'y'e think not, eh?" said Gardinois with a ferocious wink. Trembling, Clara walked towards the door without replying. The old man stopped her by a gesture.

"Take care, you don't know what you are refusing. It's in your interests, d'y'e understand, that I propose you should bring your husband down here. You don't know the life he leads up in town. You certainly don't, or you wouldn't have come to borrow my money for him to throw away on top of his own. Ah! I am well up in your husband's affairs. I have my police at Paris, and even at Asnières as well as at Savigny. I know how that fellow spends his days and nights, and I don't want my coin to go to the places where he goes. They are not decent enough for money that has been fairly earned."

Clara opened her astonished eyes, rendered larger by anguish, feeling too surely that some terrible drama was obtruding at this moment into her life by the little low gate of denunciation.

The old man continued jeeringly: "She has sharp teeth for nibbling, that little Sidonie!"

"Sidonie?"

"Faith, yes; so much the worse. I have let out her name. But there, you were sure to have known all about it one day or other. It has astonished me that for so long a time—But then you women are all so vain—the idea that any one can deceive you is the last thing to enter your heads. Ah! well, yes, 'tis Sidonie who has swallowed up everything, with her husband's consent, too, of course."

And without pity, he told the young wife, who it was had paid for the country-house at Asnières, for the horses, and carriages, for all Sidonie's luxuries. He spoke by the card. It was plain that, having had a new opportunity for exercising his mania for spying, he had largely profited by it. Perhaps also, at the bottom of it all, was a dull rage against that little Sidonie, the spite of a senile love never avowed.

Clara listened in silence, with a beautiful smile of incredulity. This smile irritated the old man, and gave a spur to his malice. "Ah! you don't believe me," said he, "you require proofs."

And he gave them to her, accumulated them, riddled her with stabs to the heart. She had only to go to Darches, the jeweller in the Rue de la Paix. A fortnight back, George had bought a *rivière* of diamonds there, for thirty thousand francs—It was Sidonie's New Year's gift—Thirty thousand francs' worth of diamonds at the moment of becoming bankrupt! He might have continued speaking the whole day without Clara interrupting him. She felt that the least effort would have caused the tears, which filled her eyes, to overflow, and she wished, on the contrary, to smile, to smile on to the end, the brave and true woman! Only from time to time she glanced at the road. She longed to leave, to be away from the sound of his wicked voice which pursued her so pitilessly.

At last he stopped; he had said all. She bowed, and went towards the door.

"Going? What a hurry you are in!" said the grandfather, following her outside. At the bottom, he was a little ashamed of his ferocity. "Won't you stay to luncheon with me?"

She shook her head, but could not utter a word.

"Wait at any rate while they put the horses too. They shall drive you to the station."

No, still no. And she continued to walk on, with the old man at her heels.

Erect, proud, she crossed the court-yard, full of souvenirs of

her childhood, without turning her head even once. And yet what echoes of hearty laughs, what rays from the sunlight of her young years, lurked in the smallest patch of gravel of that court-yard. Her tree, her favourite seat, were still in the old places. She had not a look for them, nor for the pheasants in the aviary, nor even for the great dog Kiss, who followed her docilely, waiting for a caress that he never received. She had come there as a child of the house. She went out as a stranger, with terrible pre-occupations, which the least reminder of her calm and happy past would only have further increased.

"Good-bye, grandfather," said she.

"Good-bye, then."

And the door was slammed brutally behind her.

Once alone, she began to walk quickly, very quickly, almost to run. She no longer walked, she fled. All at once, on reaching the end of the park wall, she found herself before the little green door surrounded with clematis and honeysuckle, near which the letter-box of the château was placed. Instinctively she paused, struck by one of those sudden awakenings of the memory which occur in us at decisive moments, and bring before our eyes, with startling clearness, the smallest acts of our life bearing upon present catastrophes or present joys. Was it the low and ruddy sun that had suddenly just shown itself, lighting up the immense plain this winter afternoon as in August, at the hour of its setting? Was it the silence that surrounded her, interrupted only by the sounds of nature, harmonious and very similar in all seasons? Certain it is, that she saw herself just as she had stood at this same spot on a day three years before, when she had posted a letter inviting Sidonie to come and pass a month with her in the country. Something told her that all her misfortunes dated from that moment. "Ah! if I had known—if I had known!" And she seemed still to feel, at the tips of her fingers, the smooth envelope about to fall into the box.

Then, thinking what an artless, hopeful, happy child she was at that time, a feeling of indignation came over her, her so gentle, at the cruel injustice of life. She asked herself: "Why this? What have I done to deserve it?" Suddenly it occurred to her: "No, it is not true, it is not possible. They have lied." And while pursuing her way to the station, the unhappy woman tried to convince herself of this, to feel quite certain, but she did not succeed. Truth half seen, is like the sun veiled

in clouds, which fatigues the eyes much more than the most ardent rays. In the semi-obscurity that still enveloped her misfortune, the poor woman saw more clearly than she could have wished. Now she understood and could explain to herself some of the peculiarities of her husband's existence, his absences, his uneasiness, his embarrassed airs on certain days, and the abundance of details he gave at times, when he returned home, of his day's rounds, citing names as proofs, although she had required none. From all these reminiscences, the evidence of her husband's guilt appeared the more clearly to her. Yet she still refused to believe in it, and waited until she should reach Paris to solve her doubts.

There was no one at the station, a dull, isolated little station where no traveller ever showed himself in winter. As Clara was seated there waiting for the train and vaguely surveying the melancholy looking garden of the station-master and all that were left of the climbing plants running along the fences of the road, she felt a warm moist breath upon her glove. It was her friend Kiss who had followed her, and who reminded her of their romps of former days by frisking and leaping around her, expressing a joy, full of humility, by stretching himself—with his beautiful white fur on the cold slabs of the waiting-room—at the feet of his mistress. These humble caresses that sought her out with timid and devoted sympathy made the long restrained sobs burst forth. But suddenly she felt ashamed of her weakness. She rose and dismissed the dog, dismissed him without pity, by gesture and voice, pointing to the distant house with a look so stern that poor Kiss did not know her. Then she quickly dried her eyes, for the Paris train was coming up, and she knew that in a short time she would have need of all her courage.

Her first care on alighting from the train was to drive to the jeweller's in the Rue de la Paix who, according to her grandfather, had furnished George with a set of diamonds. If that was true all the rest would be true also. Her fear of learning the truth was so great that on finding herself before the luxurious frontage of the shop, she hesitated, not daring to enter. To compose herself she pretended to examine very attentively the jewels displayed in their velvet cases; and seeing her so elegant in her quiet attire, leaning towards this delicate and attractive scintillation, one would have taken her for some happy woman about to choose an ornament, rather

than for a sorrowful afflicted being seeking there the secret of her life.

It was three in the afternoon. In winter at this time of day the Rue de la Paix has a really dazzling appearance. Between the short morning and the speedy night existence is hurried in these luxurious quarters. There is an uninterrupted coming and going of rapidly rolling carriages, and on the foot-pavements a coquettish haste, a rustling of silks and of furs. Winter is the true Paris season. To see this diabolical Paris beautiful, happy, opulent, it is necessary to see it all alive under a lowering sky, heavy with snow. Nature is, so to speak, absent from the picture. No wind, no sun, just enough light to allow the palest colours, the faintest reflections to assume an admirable value, from the grey-red tones of the monuments to the jet beads that star a woman's dress. The bills of theatres and concerts shine as if lighted by the splendours of the footlights; the shops are never empty. It seems as though all these people are engaged in making preparations for perpetual festivals. And if there should be a sorrow mingled with this noise and movement it appears all the more frightful. For five minutes Clara suffered a martyrdom worse than death. Down at Savigny, in the wilderness of the deserted plains, her despair was scattered as it were by the fresh keen wind, and seemed less poignant. Here it stifled her. The voices sounding near her, the footsteps, the careless brushing past of the passers-by, all augmented her sufferings. At last she went in.

"Ah! yes, Madame, precisely—Monsieur Fromont—A cascade of brilliants and rose-diamonds; we can make you a similar one for twenty-five thousand francs." It was five thousand francs less than he had paid.

"Thank you," said Clara, "I will think it over." In a glass opposite to her, she caught sight of her sunken eyes, and her deadly pallor frightened her. She went out quickly, steadying herself for fear of falling.

She had but one idea, to escape from the street, from the noise; to be alone, quite alone, that she might plunge and lose herself in the abyss of afflicting thoughts and dark ideas which whirled in the depths of her brain. Oh! the infamous coward! And she herself, that very night, had consoled him, had held him in her arms!

Suddenly, without knowing how it happened, she found her

self in the courtyard of the factory. What way had she taken? Had she come on foot or in a carriage? She could no longer remember. She had acted unconsciously, as though in a dream. The sense of the reality came back to her, sharp and stern, as she reached the doorstep of her house. Risler was there helping to send some boxes of flowers upstairs to his wife for the party she was going to give that same evening. With his habitual calm he directed the workmen, holding up the long branches which they might have broken. "Not that way. Keep more away from the wall. Mind the carpets."

Thus the atmosphere of pleasure and festivity that she had tried to escape from pursued her even to her own door. The irony was too great. She revolted; and when Risler, as affectionate and full of respect as ever, bowed to her, she, with an intense expression of disgust on her face, passed on without speaking or noticing the surprise that opened his large kindly eyes.

From that moment her resolve was taken. Anger, an honest and just anger, should direct her actions. She hardly gave herself time to enter, to kiss the fresh cheeks of her child, but ran to her mother's room: "Quick, mamma, dress quickly—We are going away—We are going away!"

The old lady rose slowly from the armchair in which she was seated, intently occupied in cleaning her watch-chain, by inserting with infinite precaution a pin between each of the links. Clara repressed a movement of impatience. "Come, come, quick!" said she. "Get your things ready."

Her voice trembled, and her mother's room, bright with that neatness which, little by little, had become a mania, appeared odious to her. It was one of those sinister moments when one lost illusion causes you to let all others go, lets you see the very depths of human misery. Between a mother half-crazed, a faithless husband, and a child so young, the consciousness of her isolation came home to her for the first time: but that only confirmed her in her resolution. In a moment the entire household was occupied with the preparations for this prompt and unforeseen departure. Clara hurried the confused servants, dressed her mother and the child, who laughed amid all this bustle. She wished to leave before George's return, so that when he arrived he would find the cradle empty and the house deserted. Where should she go? She did not know yet. Perhaps to an aunt at Orléans, perhaps to Savigny, no matter

where. The first thing needful was to get away, to flee from this region of treachery and falsehood.

At that moment she was in her room packing her things. Sad occupation! Every object she removed stirred whole worlds of thoughts and memories within her. There is so much of ourselves in the things we commonly use. Sometimes the perfume of a *sachet*, or some pattern of lace sufficed to move her to tears. Suddenly a heavy step sounded in the drawing-room, the door of which was ajar; then some one coughed slightly as if to give warning that there was somebody there. She believed it was Risler, for he alone had the right to enter her house with such familiarity. The idea of again seeing that hypocritical face, that false smile, troubled her so much that she ran to shut the door. "I am at home to no one," said she.

The door resisted, and the square head of Sigismond appeared in the opening. "It is I, Madame," he whispered. "I have come for the money."

"What money?" asked Clara, forgetting the reason of her journey to Savigny.

"Hush! The funds for the bills that fall due to-morrow. M. George said, when he went out, that you would give them to me by-and-bye."

"Ah! yes. 'Tis true. The hundred thousand francs. Well, I have not got them, Monsieur Planus; I have nothing!"

"Then," said the cashier in a strange voice, as if speaking to himself, "then it is bankruptcy." And he turned away slowly.

Bankruptcy! She sat down, terrified, overcome. For some hours the ruin of her happiness had made her forget the ruin of the firm, but she remembered now. So her husband was ruined. When he returned by-and-bye he would learn this disaster, and he would at the same time learn that his wife and child had gone away, that he remained alone amidst the wreck.

Alone! he so soft, so weak, he who could only weep and complain and shake his fist at life, like a child. What would he do, unhappy man? She pitied him in spite of his crime: Then the idea came to her that perhaps she would appear to have fled in presence of bankruptcy and want. George might say to himself: "If I had been rich, she might have forgiven me!" Ought she to leave him in this doubt?

To a generous and proud soul like Clara's, nothing more was needed to change her resolution. In a moment all her aversions,

all her defections, were appeased, and a sudden light as it were appeared the better to guide her to her duty. When they came to tell her that the child was dressed and her trunks were ready, her new resolution was taken :

"It is unnecessary," she answered softly, "we are not going away."

CHAPTER III.

THE DAY OF RECKONING.

ONE o'clock in the morning was striking by the great clock of St. Gervais. It was so cold that the thin flakes of falling snow crystallised in the air, and crackled as you trod on them.

Risler, wrapped in his cloak, was walking briskly home from the brasserie through the deserted Marais. The worthy fellow was in a joyous mood. He had just been celebrating, in company with his two faithful borrowers, Chèbe and Delobelle, his first outing after his long seclusion devoted to superintending the construction of his printing-machine, during which he had felt all the uncertainty, all the alternate joy and discomfiture of an inventor. The job had indeed been long, very long. At the last moment an imperfection had been discovered. The gripper did not act well ; and they had been obliged to make fresh plans and drawings. At length, that very day they had tried the new machine, and everything had succeeded as satisfactorily as could be wished. The good man was proud of that success. It seemed to him that he had just paid a debt, in giving to Fromont's firm the benefit of a new invention, which would save labour and workmen's wages, and at the same time double the profits and renown of the factory. He had some fine dreams, I can assure you, as he walked along. He stepped out proudly, keeping time, as it were, to the strong happy flight of his fancy.

What plans he formed ! What hopes he nursed ! He would soon be able to replace the chalet at Asnières—which Sidonie began to despise as a hovel—by some fine country-house ten or fifteen leagues from Paris, to give M. Chèbe a somewhat

better allowance, to oblige Delobelle, whose unhappy wife was killing herself with work, more frequently ; above all, he would be able to have Frank back. That was his dearest wish. He was ever thinking of the poor fellow, exiled to an unhealthy climate, at the good pleasure of a tyrannical board, which granted leave to the people in its employ, only to recall them almost immediately without explanation ; for Risler had never forgotten the strangely sudden departure of Frank on his last voyage, and the brief apparition of his brother, who, without giving him time to study him anew, had yet revived all the old memories of mutual affection, and life in common. So he looked forward, when the printing-machine was fairly started, to finding some little place in the factory where Frank could be of use, and make a prosperous career for himself. As usual, Risler only thought of the happiness of others. His single, selfish satisfaction was in seeing everybody around him smile.

Hurrying on, he reached the corner of the Rue des Vieilles-Haudriettes. A long line of carriages was drawn up before the house, and the light of their lamps in the street, the shadows of the coachmen sheltering themselves from the snow in the corners and angles, which these old mansions have preserved, despite the straightening of the pavements, gave life to the usually silent and desolate neighbourhood.

"Ah ! I forgot !" thought Risler to himself, "we have a ball to-night." He remembered that Sidonie was giving a grand musical and dancing soirée at which, by the bye, she had dispensed with his presence, "knowing he was too much occupied." In the midst of his projects and of his visions of wealth and generosity this entertainment, the echoes of which reached him in the street, rejoiced him still more and made him feel all the prouder. With a certain solemnity he pushed open the heavy door, left ajar for the going and coming of the guests, and saw at the bottom of the garden the entire second story brilliantly lighted up.

Shadows passed and repassed before the floating veil of the curtains ; the music of the orchestra, guessed at as it were amidst a flux and reflux of stifled sounds, seemed to follow the movements of these furtive apparitions. Dancing was evidently going on. Risler stopped for a moment to look at the moving shadows and in a little room next the drawing-room recognised the outline of his wife.

She was standing upright in her rich toilette, in the attitude

of a pretty woman before her mirror. Behind her a smaller shadow, Madame Dobson no doubt, was engaged in arranging her dress, setting straight some ribbon or other. It was all very vague, but the grace of the woman was recognisable in the hardly indicated lines, and Risler paused some time in admiration.

On the first story the contrast was striking. There was no light burning save one little lamp behind the lilac curtains of the bedroom. Risler noticed this detail, and as little Fromont had been ill a few days before, he felt uneasy. Remembering, moreover, the agitation of Madame George, as she passed rapidly by him in the afternoon, he retraced his steps as far as the lodge to ask Daddy Achille the news.

The lodge was crowded. Coachmen were warming themselves round the stove, and chattering and laughing over their pipes. When Risler showed himself there was sudden silence, a curious, ironical, inquisitive silence. Doubtless he had been the subject of their conversation.

"Is the child still ill at Fromont's?"

"No, not the child, it is Monsieur Fromont."

"Is Monsieur George ill?"

"Yes, he was taken bad this evening when he came in. I went for the doctor at once. He says it is nothing, that Monsieur George only wants rest."

And as Risler closed the door Daddy Achille said in a low voice, with that insolence of an inferior, half-timid, half-bold, which is meant to be heard yet only to be partially understood, "Ah! they are not merry-making on the first floor like they are on the second."

This is what had come to pass. George, on returning in the evening, had found his wife with so broken-hearted and altered a look on her face that he at once guessed something had happened. Only he had been so accustomed, for two years, to see his faithlessness pass unpunished, that it never for a moment entered his head that his wife might have been informed of his conduct. Clara, on her side, not to overwhelm him, had the generosity to speak only of Savigny. "Grandfather refused," said she.

The unhappy man grew fearfully pale. "I am ruined—I am ruined!" repeated he two or three times almost deliriously; and his sleepless nights, a last terrible scene he had just had with Sidonie to prevent her from giving this entertainment on

the eve of his downfall, the refusal of M. Gardinois,—all these blows, one following upon the other, brought on a nervous attack. Clara had pity on him, made him go to bed, and seated herself beside him. She tried to talk to him, to raise his spirits ; but her voice had no longer that accent of tenderness which quiets and persuades. In her gestures, in the way in which she arranged the pillow under the head of the sick man, and in which she prepared him a soothing draught, there was a singular indifference and abstraction.

“But I have ruined you!” said George from time to time, as if to stir this coldness which troubled him. She shook her head with a proud movement of disdain—Ah! if he had done but that alone!

At last, however, his nerves grew calm, the fever abated and he slept. She kept watch beside him. “It is my duty,” said she to herself. Her duty! That was the point she had reached in regard to the being she had adored so blindly in the hope of a long and happy life together.

At this moment Sidonie’s ball began to grow animated. The ceiling shook in measured cadence ; for to make dancing easier Madame Risler had taken up all the carpets. Sometimes, too, a sound of singing came fitfully, then plenteous and repeated applause, whence might be inferred throngs of guests and crowded rooms.

Clara mused. She did not weary herself with regrets or barren denunciations. She knew that life was inflexible, and that no reasonings would arrest the sad logic of its inevitable course. She did not ask how this man had been able to deceive her for so long—why, for a mere caprice, he had destroyed the honour and the joy of his home. That much was an accomplished fact ; and all her reflections could not alter it nor repair the irreparable. What occupied her thoughts was the future. A new existence spread itself out before her eyes, sombre, severe, full of privation and toil ; yet, singularly enough, ruin, instead of terrifying her, brought back all her courage. The idea of a change of residence, necessary to the economy they would have to practise, of enforced labour for George and perhaps for herself, roused her strangely. What a heavy cure of souls she would have with her three children—her mother, her daughter and her husband. The sense of her responsibility prevented her from being too much afflicted by her trouble, by the overthrow of her love ; and in proportion as

she forgot herself in the thought of the feeble beings she would have to protect, she comprehended better the value of that word "sacrifice," so vague in indifferent mouths, so serious when it becomes a rule of life.

So mused the poor woman during her sad vigil, a vigil of arms and tears through which she prepared for the great struggle that was to come. Such was the scene the modest little lamp shone on,—the lamp Risler had seen from below, looking like a star fallen from the glittering lustres of the ball-room.

Reassured by the answer of Daddy Achille, the worthy man thought of going to his own room, thereby escaping the entertainment and the guests, for whom he did not much care. On such occasions he was wont to use a back-staircase leading from the cashier's office. His way lay through the glass-roofed workshops, which the moonlight, reflected by the white snow, made light as day. The scents peculiar to the kind of toil to which, in the daytime, they were devoted—scents of talc and varnish—still hung about them, and there was an oppressive closeness in the air. Drying horses, covered with rustling sheets of paper, were ranged alley-wise; everywhere tools lay scattered about, and blouses were hanging up in rows, ready for the morrow. Risler never passed this way without pleasure.

Suddenly, at the end of the long string of deserted rooms, he perceived a light in Planus's office. The old cashier was still at work. Strange, indeed, this, at one in the morning.

Risler's first impulse was to turn back. In fact, since his incomprehensible misunderstanding with Sigismond, since the latter had assumed that cold silence towards him, he had avoided meeting the cashier. Wounded friendship had always kept him from seeking an explanation; he took a sort of pride in not asking Planus why he had a grudge against him. But this evening Risler felt such need of expansion and cordiality, and, besides, the occasion was so opportune for a private talk with his old friend, that he availed himself of the chance and bravely entered the office.

The cashier was there, seated motionless amid piles of papers and well-thumbed big books, some of which had fallen to the ground. At the noise his employer made in entering he did not even raise his head. He had recognised Risler's step. The latter, a little intimidated, hesitated a moment; then urged by one of those secret impulses, which we all have within us and

which lead us despite ourselves on our fated road, he went straight up to the wire-grating which shut in the cashier's sanctum.

"Sigismond," said he in a grave tone.

The old man looked up and displayed a woebegone face, down which two great tears were rolling, the first tears perhaps which this man-cipher had shed in his life.

"Crying, old fellow? Why, what's the matter?" exclaimed Risler. And the worthy man, quite affected, held out his hand to his friend who withdrew his own quickly. This movement of recoil was so instinctive, so violent, that Risler's emotion changed at once to indignation.

He drew himself up sternly. "I offer you my hand, Sigismond Planus," said he.

"And I refuse to take it," said Planus rising.

There was a terrible silence, during which the deadened music of the orchestra and the noise of the ball—that dull, heavy noise of boards shaken by the rhythmic movement of the dance—were heard above.

"Why do you refuse to give me your hand?" Risler simply asked, the wire-grating on which he was leaning shaking meanwhile with a metallic rattle. Sigismond stood before him resting both hands on the table as if to put what he was about to say deliberately and clearly.

"Why? Because you have ruined the firm, because presently where you stand some one from the Bank will stand and ask for a hundred thousand francs, while thanks to you I have not a sou in my safe. That's why!"

Risler stood stupefied. "I have ruined the house! I? I?"

"Worse than that, sir. You have ruined it through your wife, and you have arranged to benefit by our ruin and your own dishonour. Oh! I see clearly through your game. The money your wife has got from that unhappy Fromont, the house at Asnières, the diamonds and all the rest, the whole is held I suppose in her name, sheltered from all storms; and you will no doubt be able to retire from business now."

"Oh! oh!" cried Risler in a choked tone, and his tongue failed him to express the whirl of thoughts which eddied through his brain. Stammering incoherent words, he pulled the wire grating towards him with so much force as to tear away a whole section of it. At last he tottered, fell to the floor, and remained motionless and speechless, keeping only alive in him

a firm resolve not to die before being justified. That resolve must have been firm indeed ; for whilst his temples throbbed under the rush of blood that purpled his face, whilst there was a fearful buzzing in his ears, and his closed eyes seemed already turned towards the terrible unknown, the unhappy man said to himself in an unintelligible voice,—the voice of the shipwrecked sailor who cries with his mouth full of water amidst the howl of a tempest : “ I must live—I must live.”

When consciousness returned to him he was seated on the bench where the workmen sat on pay-days, his cloak on the ground, his cravat untied, his shirt cut open by Sigismond’s penknife. Happily for him he had cut his hands in tearing away the grating and the blood had flowed abundantly. This alone had saved him from an attack of apoplexy. On opening his eyes, he saw beside him old Sigismond and Madame George, whom the cashier had sought in his distress. As soon as Risler could speak, it was to her he addressed himself in suffocated accents : “ Is it true ? Madame Chorche, is what he has told me true ? ”

She had not the courage to deceive him, and turned away.

“ So,” continued the unhappy man, “ the firm is ruined, and through my fault.”

“ No, Risler, my friend, not by you.”

“ By my wife, eh ? Oh, it is horrible. So this is how I have paid my debt of gratitude to you. But you, Madame Chorche, you cannot believe me an accomplice in this infamy.”

“ No, my friend, no ; calm yourself. I believe you are the most honest man in the world.”

He looked at her for a moment, with quivering lips and joined hands, for all the manifestations of this artless nature had something childish in them.

“ Oh ! Madame Chorche, Madame Chorche,” murmured he, “ when I think it is I who have ruined you ! ”

In this great blow that had come upon him, and by which his heart full of love for Sidonie was especially reached, he was resolved to see nothing, but the financial disaster of the firm, caused by his blind partiality for his wife. All at once he sprung up.

“ Come,” said he, “ don’t let us give way to our feelings. We must put our accounts in order.”

Madame Fromont was frightened. “ Risler, Risler, where are you going ? ” she asked.

She feared he was going to George. Risler understood her, and with a haughty smile of disdain said: "Take courage, Madame, Monsieur George may sleep in peace. I have something more important to do than to avenge my honour as a husband—wait for me here. I shall return."

He sprang up the back-staircase, and trusting to his word, Clara remained with Planus during one of those anxious intervals of uncertainty which doubt makes terribly long.

In a few minutes a sound of hurried footsteps and the rustle of a woman's dress came from the dark narrow staircase. Sidonie appeared the first, in full ball-dress,—splendid, yet so pale that the jewels glittering everywhere on her clear skin seemed more alive than herself, seemed spread on the cold marble of a statue. She was still agitated and breathless from the dance, and trembled, partly from emotion, partly from the rapidity with which she had come; her ribbons, skirts, flounces and flowers, all her rich adornments, hung about her in tragic fashion. Risler followed, laden with jewel-boxes, valuable nick-nacks, and papers. On reaching his wife's room he had wrenched open her bureau, seized everything precious it contained, jewels, bonds, the title-deed of the house at Asnières; then from the threshold of the chamber he had called in a loud voice into the ball-room, "Madame Risler!"

She had come out quickly before anything of this rapid scene had been observed by the guests, then in the fulness of the evening's animation. Seeing her husband standing before her bureau, the drawers broken open and overturned on the carpet with the thousand little nothings which they contained, she comprehended that something terrible was going on.

"Come! quick!" said Risler, "I know all."

She would have assumed an innocent and haughty bearing, but he seized her by the arm with such violence that she remembered Frank's warning, "He will die of it perhaps, but he will kill you first." As she dreaded death she allowed him to hurry her along without resistance, and had not even strength enough to lie to him.

"Where are we going?" she asked faintly.

Risler made no reply. She had only time to throw a light lace shawl over her bare shoulders, with that care for herself which never left her, and he led, or rather pushed her to the staircase leading to the office: he descending it at the same

time as her—following in her steps as if he feared to see his prey escape him.

"There!" cried Risler, as he entered the cashier's room, "we have stolen—we make restitution. There, Planus, there is something to make money with." •

And he placed on the table all the elegant spoil which his arms were filled with, feminine nick-nacks, slight coquetish objects, stamped documents. Then he turned towards his wife, "Now, the jewels you have on; come, quick!"

She slowly and with regret unfastened her bracelets and ear-rings, and especially the magnificent clasp of her diamond necklace, on which the initial of her name, a great glittering S, seemed like a sleeping serpent imprisoned in a ring of gold. Risler, who deemed her too long, brutally snapped the frail fastenings. Luxury cried under his fingers as if chastised.

"Now, my turn," said he; "I, too, must give up all. There is my pocket-book, what else have I got? what else have I got?" He searched his pockets feverishly. "Ah! my watch, with the chain, it will fetch a thousand francs, my rings, my wedding-ring, all into the safe! all! We have a hundred thousand francs to pay by morning. At daybreak we must take the field, sell, liquidate! I know some one who wants the house at Asnières. That shall be seen to at once."

He spoke and acted all alone. Sigismund and Madame George looked on speechless. As for Sidonie, she seemed inert, unconscious. The cold air that came from the garden, through the little door, left open since Risler's fainting-fit, made her shiver, and mechanically she drew around her the folds of her scarf with fixed eyes and thoughts all astray. Did she even hear the violins of her ball-room, as their sound came floating towards the intervals of silence, mingling with savage irony with the dull noise of the dancers shaking the boards? A hand of iron seizing her roused her suddenly from her torpor. Risler had taken her by the arm and led her before his partner's wife.

"On your knees," he said to her.

Madame Fromont drew back, protesting. "No, no, Risler, not that," she cried.

"It must be," returned Risler, implacably. "Restitution, reparation! on your knees, wretch!" And by an irresistible movement he threw Sidonie at Clara's feet, then, still holding her arm, he continued: "You will repeat after me, word for word, what I am going to say: Madame."

Sidonie, half dead with fear, repeated softly, "Madame."

"A whole life of humility, of submission."

"A whole life of humil— No, I cannot," cried she, rising with the spring of a wild beast; and, throwing off Risler's hold, she rushed out, under the falling snow and the wind that scourged her bare shoulders, through the little door which had tempted her since the commencement of this fearful scene, and had attracted her to the darkness of the night and the freedom of flight.

"Stop her! stop her! Risler, Planus, I entreat you, do not let her go away thus."

Planus made a step towards the door. Risler checked him: "I forbid you to move," said he, "I beg pardon, Madame, but we have to deal with business far more important than that. It is no longer a question of Madame Risler in this house now. We have to save the honour of the house of Fromont, the only thing at stake, the only thing that occupies me at this moment. Come, Planus, to your books, and let us make up our accounts."

Sigismond held out his hand: "You are an honest man, Risler. Forgive me for having suspected you."

Risler pretended not to hear him. "A hundred thousand francs to pay, we say? How much have we now towards it?"

Gravely seating himself behind the cashier's wire screen, he looked over the account books, and the bonds, and examined the contents of the jewel-caskets, estimating, with Planus, whose father had been a jeweller, the worth of all the diamonds he had formerly admired on his wife, without then having any idea of their value.

All this time Clara looked tremblingly through the window into the little garden white with snow, where the traces of Sidonie's feet were already being effaced under the flakes that fell as if to bear witness that in this furtive departure there was no hope of return.

Above stairs the dancing still went on. The guests believed the mistress of the house was occupied with the preparations for supper, while she was thus fleeing away with bare head, stifling sobs and cries of rage.

Where was she to go? She had fled like a mad woman crossing the garden, the factory-courts, the sombre arched gateway through which rushed the icy, sinister wind. Daddy Achille

had not recognised her, he had seen so many forms wrapped up in white, pass that night.

Her first idea was to go to the tenor Cazaboni, whom after all she had not dared to invite to her ball; but he lived at Montmartre, and that was a great distance in her present attire; and besides would he be at home?

Her parents would have received her no doubt, but she could already hear the lamentations of Madame Chèbe and the discourses under three heads of the little man. Then she thought of Delobelle, of her old Delobelle. In the collapse of all her splendour she remembered him who was the first to initiate her in the ways of society, who gave her lessons in dancing and deportment when she was little, laughed at her pretty ways and taught her that she was beautiful before any one had said so. Something told her that this Ishmael would take her part against all the others. She entered one of the cabs which were standing at the gate and desired the man to drive to the actor's dwelling on the Boulevard Beaumarchais.

For some time past Madame Delobelle had taken to make straw hats for exportation, a wearisome occupation enough, bringing in but two francs and a half for twelve hours' work. As for Delobelle he continued to grow stout in proportion as his "sainted wife" grew thinner and thinner. At this very moment he was about to uncover a savoury soup *au fromage* which had been kept warm amongst the embers of the hearth, when a sharp knock came to the door. The actor who had just returned from the Beaumarchais Theatre—where he had been to see some sinister drama or other, stained with blood to the very illustrations on the playbills—started at this knock at so unseasonable an hour.

"Who is there?" he asked with some agitation.

"It is I! Sidonie! open quickly."

Shivering all over, she came in and throwing off her lace shawl approached the stove the fire of which still smouldered. She spoke out at once, venting the anger which had been strangling her for the past hour; and while she related the scene at the factory—lowering her voice on account of Madame Delobelle sleeping close by—the luxury of her dress in this bare poverty-stricken fifth story, the white splendour of her rumpled finery amid the piles of coarsely made hats, and the shreds of straw scattered about the room, all gave the impression of a drama, of one of those terrible catastrophes in which

ranks, feelings and fortunes find themselves suddenly intermingled.

"Oh! I shall never go back home—It is all over—Free! I am free!"

"But," asked the actor, "who on earth informed against you?"

"It is Frank, I am certain it is Frank. He would not have believed it from any one else. Only last night a letter came from Egypt. Oh! how he treated me before that woman—To force me to go on my knees to her! But I will be revenged. Happily I secured something that will revenge me, before coming away." And the old smile curled her pale lips.

The player listened to all this with great interest. In spite of his compassion for that poor devil of a Risler and for Sidonie even, who appeared to him in theatrical phraseology in the light of a "fair culprit," he could not help looking at the thing from a purely scenic point of view, and, carried away by his mania, he exclaimed at last, "What a stunning situation, all the same, for a fifth act!"

Sidonie did not hear him. Absorbed in some evil thought, at which she smiled in anticipation, she was holding her open worked stockings and thin shoes soaked with snow to the fire.

"What do you think of doing?" asked Delobelle presently.

"Remaining here till morning, resting a little. Then I shall see."

"I have no bed, you see, to offer you, my poor girl. The old lady has retired for the night."

"Don't disturb yourself about me, my good Delobelle. I can sleep in this arm-chair. I don't mean to be in the way."

The actor sighed. "Ah! yes—that arm-chair. It was our poor Zizi's. She has sat up in it many a night when work pressed. Well! Decidedly those that have gone are the happiest, after all."

He had always one of these consolingly egotistical maxims at his disposal. Hardly had he formulated this one than he perceived with terror that his soup was getting completely cold. Sidonie caught his glance. "You were having supper, weren't you?" said she. "Go on with it."

"Well! yes. What would you have? 'Tis part of the profession—an item of the rough life we lead. For you see, my child, I hold firm—I have not given up. I never will give up." Whatever of Désirée yet tarried in that miserable interior

where she had lived for twenty years, must have shuddered at this terrible declaration. He never would give up!

Delobelle continued: "It is no good their talking, you see. It is the finest profession in the world. One is free and dependent on no one—All for glory and the public! Ah! I know what I should do in your place. You were not born to live amongst tradespeople, deuce take it! Yours should have been an artistic life—with the fever of success, excitement, emotion." While speaking he had seated himself, tucked his napkin under his chin, and helped himself to a great plateful of soup.

"Besides, your success as a pretty woman would not impede your success as an actress. I'll tell you what you should do. You should take some lessons in elocution. With your voice, your intelligence, your capabilities, you would have a magnificent future." Then, all at once as if to initiate her into the joys of the dramatic art, he exclaimed: "But I forgot you have had no supper. Emotions exhaust one. Sit down there, take this platé, I am sure you have not eaten soup *au fromage* for a long time."

He ransacked the cupboard to find her a spoon and a napkin, and she sat down opposite him, helping him and laughing a little at the difficulties of the arrangements. She was already less pale; her eyes even glistened brightly from recent tears and present gaiety. Truly a born actress! All her good place in the world had gone for ever,—honour, family, fortune. She had been driven from her home, stripped, disgraced. She had just been subjected to every humiliation, every disaster. That did not prevent her supping with marvellous appetite, and gaily answering the jokes of Delobelle on her future vocation and her future success. She felt light, happy, bound for Bohemia, her true country. What things were yet in store for her? Of how many ups and downs would her new, unlooked for, haphazard existence be composed? She thought of that problem as she fell asleep in Désirée's great arm-chair, but she thought also of her vengeance, her sweet vengeance, which she had ready at hand, sure and terrible!

CHAPTER IV.

THE NEW ASSISTANT AT FROMONT'S.

It was broad daylight when young Fromont awoke. All night, between the drama played below and the ball going on above him, he had slept like a top,—slept one of those sleeps of exhaustion, such as criminals have on the eve of their execution, or conquered generals on the night of their defeat,—such sleep as one would wish never to awake from,—sleep which in its utter oblivion teaches us what death is like.

The bright light that stole through the curtains—increased by the reflection from the thick snow, with which the garden and the surrounding roofs were covered—brought him back to a sense of the reality. He felt a shock through all his being, and even before memory returned had that vague impression of sadness which forgotten miseries leave behind them. All the well-known sounds of the factory, the dull panting of the machines, were in full swing. The world still existed then! Little by little the notion of responsibility stirred within him.

"It is due to-day," he said to himself, involuntarily covering himself with the blankets, as though to plunge again into prolonged sleep. The factory bell rang out, then other bells in the neighbourhood, then the angelus.

"Twelve o'clock—already! How I have slept!"

He felt a little remorse and a great relief on reflecting that the drama of the day on which the bills came due had been played out without him. How had they got on below? Why had he not been summoned?

He rose, half opened the window-curtains, and saw Risler and Sigismond talking together in the garden. They, who never spoke to each other, now conversing in this fashion! What had happened, then? When he was ready to go downstairs, he found Clara at his room-door.

"You must not go out," said she to him.

"Why?"

"Stay here ! I will explain to you."

"But what is the matter ? Has any one come from the Bank ?"

"Yes, some one came ; the drafts have been met."

"Met ?"

"Risler found the money ; he has been running about with Planus all the morning. It seems that his wife had some superb jewels. The necklace of diamonds alone has been sold for twenty thousand francs. They have also sold the house at Asnières with all its contents ; but, as time was required to register the deed of sale, Planus and his sister have advanced the money."

She turned from him as she spoke ; he on his side hung his head to avoid her gaze. "Risler is a man of honour," she went on to say ; "and when he knew to whom his wife owed all this luxury——"

"What !" cried George, in terror, "he knows ?"

"All,"—answered Clara, lowering her voice.

"The unhappy man turned pale, stammered some words :

"But, then—you ?"

"I ! Oh ! I knew it all before Risler. Yesterday, on coming home, do you remember, I told you that down at Savigny I had heard very cruel things, and that I would have given ten years of my life never to have made the journey."

"Clara !"

He felt a great rush of tenderness, and made a step towards his wife : but she wore so cold and sadly resolved a look, her despair was so plainly written in austere indifference over all her person, that he dared not clasp her to his heart as he had wished, and only murmured in a whisper : "Forgive me, oh, forgive me !"

"I daresay I seem very calm," said the brave woman. "'Tis because I shed all my tears yesterday. You thought, perhaps, I was crying because of our ruin ; but you were mistaken. When one is young and strong as we are, such cowardice is not allowable. We are armed against misery, and we can fight it face to face. No, I wept for our dead happiness, for you, for the folly which has made you lose your only true friend."

She was beautiful as she spoke thus, more beautiful than Sidonie had ever been, enveloped as she was in a pure light which seemed to fall from above on her, as from a deep-blue, cloudless sky : while Sidonie's irregular features, on the other

hand, seemed ever to draw their brilliancy, their insolent saucy attraction, as though from the footlights of some suburban theatre. Whatever had formerly seemed a trifle cold and motionless in Clara's physiognomy, was now animated with anxiety, doubt, and all the agony of passion; and, like golden ingots, which have not their value until the mint has stamped them, this fair woman's face, impressed with the effigy of sorrow, had assumed since the previous evening an ineffaceable expression which completed its beauty.

George looked at her with admiration. She seemed to him more human, more womanly, more adorable, from the very fact of the separations and obstacles that he now felt existed between them. Remorse, despair, shame entered into his heart in company with this new love, and he made a gesture as though to throw himself on his knees before her.

"No, no, stand up," said Clara; "if you knew what that recalls to me, if you knew what face, deceitful and full of hatred, I have seen at my feet this night!"

"Oh! I am not deceiving you," said George, tremblingly. "Clara, I beseech you, in the name of our child—"

At this moment there came a knock at the door. "Get up. You see that life claims us," she said in a low voice with a bitter smile; and she went to ask what was wanted. M. Risler had sent to request M. Fromont to see him in the office.

"Very well," answered she, "say he is coming down."

George made a step towards the door, but she stopped him. "No!" she interposed: "let me go down. He need not see you yet."

"But still—"

"Yes, I insist. You do not know in what a state of indignation and anger that unhappy man is whom you have deceived. If you had but seen him last night crushing his wife's wrists."

She said these words, looking into his eyes with a curiosity cruel for herself; but George showed no emotion, and contented himself with replying: "My life belongs to this man."

"Your life belongs to me, too, and I will not allow you to go down. There has been scandal enough in my father's house. The whole factory knows all that has happened. They watch us and spy us. The foremen have had need of all their authority to start the work to-day, and to keep these curious eyes fixed on their tasks."

"But it will look as if I was hiding."

"Well! suppose it does. How like a man! You feel no shame in committing the greatest crimes, in being faithless to your wife, faithless to your friend; but the thought of being accused of being afraid touches you to the quick. Besides, listen, Sidonie has gone for ever, and if you leave this room I shall think you are seeking to follow her."

"Very well! I will stop here," said George; "I will do all you wish." Clara thereupon went down-stairs to Planus's office.

To see Risler walking up and down, his hands behind his back, calm as usual, one would never have guessed all that had taken place in his life since the evening before. As to Sigismond, he was beaming, seeing in all that had happened nothing but his bills met at the appointed time, and the honour of the firm safe and sound.

When Madame Fromont appeared Risler smiled sadly and shook his head. "I thought you would come in his place, but 'tisn't you I want. I must see your husband, I must speak to him. We have met the bills this morning; the worst is over; but we have to consider many things together."

"Risler, my friend, wait a little. I implore you!"

"Why, Madame Chorche? There is not a minute to spare. Ah! I see! You are afraid I shall give way to anger; reassure yourself, reassure him. You know what I told you; there is an honour that touches me more than my own, the honour of the house of Fromont. I have compromised it by my fault. Before aught else, I must repair the harm I have done, or that I have allowed to be done."

"I know well how admirably you are behaving to us, dear Risler."

"Ah! Madame, if you had seen him! He is a saint," said poor Sigismond, who, no longer daring to speak to his friend, wished at least to testify his remorse.

Clara continued: "But are you not afraid? There are limits to human forbearance. Perhaps in the presence of one who has done you so great a wrong—"

Risler took her hand, and looked into the depths of her eyes with serious admiration.

"Dear creature, to speak only of the wrong done to me! you do not know then that I hate him as much for his treason to you. But I put all that away from me for the moment. Just now I am only a tradesman who wishes to consult with his partner for the good of the house. Let him come down then

without fear, and if you dread any outbreak on my part, stay with us. I have only to look at the daughter of my old master to remind me of my word and of my duty."

"I believe you, my friend," said Clara, and she went to seek her husband.

The meeting was terrible enough at the outset. George was pale, agitated, humiliated. He would rather a hundred times have stood before this man's pistol, awaiting his fire at twenty paces, than have met him in this wise, an unpunished culprit obliged to restrain his feelings to the commonplace calm of a business interview.

Risler affected not to look at his partner, and continued to walk up and down as he spoke. "Our firm has just passed through a frightful crisis. For to-day the catastrophe has been averted; but these are not the last bills we have to meet. That cursed invention has for a long time turned my attention from business. Happily I am free now and shall be able to see to things. But you must also look into matters. The clerks and workmen have followed the example of the masters. There is extreme negligence and carelessness amongst them—this morning, for the first time for a year past, work was started at the proper hour. I depend on you to set all these matters to rights. As for myself I must look to our designs. Our patterns are mostly old, and we need new ones for the new machinery. I have great confidence in our printing-machine. The experiments have succeeded beyond my hopes. We have thus to a certainty something that will revive our trade. I have not alluded to this before, because I wished to surprise you; but now we have no more surprises for each other. Have we, George?"

His voice had an expression of such heart-rending irony that Clara trembled, fearing an outbreak; but he continued quite naturally: "Yes, I think I can undertake that in six months the Risler machine will begin to yield magnificent results. Only, these six months will be difficult to get over. We shall have to limit ourselves, diminish our expenses, effect all the saving we can. We have five designers; we will have only two. I promise, by sitting up late, to make up for the absence of the others. Moreover, I shall no longer draw my share as partner after this month. I shall be paid as a servant, as in the old times, and that is all I shall take from the business."

Fromont was about to speak, but a sign from his wife restrained him, and Risler continued: "I am no longer your

partner, George, I am your assistant once more as I ought to have been all along. From to-day our deed of partnership is annulled. I insist on it, you understand me, I insist on it! We will remain thus towards each other until the day when the house shall be out of its difficulties, and when I may—But what I may do then is my business. That's what I had to say to you, George. You must occupy yourself actively in the factory, the people must see you, must feel the master's presence, and I think that amongst all our misfortunes, there are some that are not irreparable."

In the silence that followed this speech, a noise of wheels was heard in the garden, and two large furniture vans drew up to the doorstep. "I beg pardon," said Risler, "I must leave you for a moment. These are the vans from the auction rooms, come for my goods upstairs."

"What! Are you also selling your furniture?" asked Madame Fromont.

"Certainly, to the last stick. I return it all to the firm, it belongs to it."

"But this must not be," cried George, "I cannot permit it."

Risler turned towards him with a movement of indignation. "What do you say? What is it you cannot permit?"

Clara stopped him with a beseeching look. "It is true—it is true," murmured he, and he quickly left the office to escape from the temptation that had come over him, to give his feelings full vent.

The second floor was deserted. The servants who had been paid and dismissed some hours before, had abandoned the rooms to all the disorder of the day after a feast. Everything looked as though some sudden catastrophe had come to pass. The open doors, the carpets piled up in the corners of the rooms, the trays covered with glasses, the preparations for supper, the table laid out all ready with nothing upon it touched, the dust resulting from the dancing remaining on the furniture, the mingled perfume of punch, fading flowers, and pearl-powder—all these details presented themselves to Risler as he entered.

In the disordered drawing-room the piano was open, with the bacchanalian chorus from "*Orphée aux Enfers*" spread on the music-rest; and the bright-coloured hangings floating loose, with the overturned chairs, gave the impression of a saloon in a wrecked steampacket—of one of those frightful nights of

alarm, when you learn suddenly in the midst of a fête on board that a collision has started the timbers and that the vessel is fast making water.

They were beginning to take away the furniture. Risler watched the packers at work with an unconcerned air as though he had been in the house of a stranger. All this luxury of which he had once been so proud filled him now with insurmountable disgust. Still, when he came to his wife's bedroom he felt a vague emotion.

It was a large room draped in blue satin covered with lace, a room well suited for some gay lady of pleasure. Scattered about were flounces of tulle, torn and rumpled, bows of ribbon, and artificial flowers. The looking-glass candles, burnt down to the very end, had burst the sockets; and the bed veiled with its heavy lace and blue hangings, its great curtains drawn and tucked up, untouched amidst the disturbance, seemed the bed of a dead person lying in state, on which no one would ever sleep again.

Risler's first movement on entering was one of intense anger; he felt a desire to throw himself on all these objects, to tear up, to break, to smash everything. The fact is that nothing is more characteristic of a woman than her bedroom. Even when absent, her image still smiles from the mirrors that have reflected it. Something of herself, of her favourite perfume, rests on all she has touched. Her attitudes are reproduced on the cushions of the couches, and you may follow her comings and goings from the mirror to the dressing-table on the pattern of the carpet. Here what especially recalled Sidonie was a whatnot covered with childish nick-nacks, trifles in china, tiny fans, doll's tea services, gilded shoes, little shepherds and shepherdesses facing each other and exchanging cold and glittering porcelain glances.

This whatnot was the very soul of Sidonie, whose thoughts, always commonplace, little, vain and empty, resembled these trifles. Truly, if Risler, when he held her that night had broken her little fragile head in his fury, there would have rolled out instead of brains a whole world of these bracket ornaments.

The poor man was thinking sadly of these things, amid the noise of hammers and the goings and comings of the packers, when a little meddling authoritative step sounded behind him, and M. Chébe appeared, red, breathless, fiery. He took as

usual a very high tone with his son-in-law : "What is this? What do I hear? Ah! you are removing then?"

"Not removing, M. Chèbe. I am selling off."

The little man almost jumped out of his skin. "You are selling off? What are you selling, in heaven's name?"

"I am selling everything," said Risler, in a thick voice, without even looking at him.

"Come, come, my boy, be reasonable. Mind, I do not say that Sidonie's conduct—Besides I know nothing, I know nothing—I never would hear anything—only I would remind you of your dignity. Deuce take it! dirty linen should be washed in private! A man shouldn't make a spectacle of himself, as you are doing this morning. Look at all the people at the workshop windows, and under the porch, too! You are the talk of the neighbourhood, my dear fellow."

"So much the better, the dishonour was public, let the reparation be public also."

This apparent calm, this indifference to all his observations, exasperated M. Chèbe. He suddenly changed his tone and spoke to his son-in-law in the serious and absolute tone one would use to a child or a madman. "If you will have it, you have no right to move anything away from here. I oppose it formally with all my force as a man, with all my authority as a father. Do you think I will allow you to turn my child out of house and home. Oh! dear, no. Enough of these follies. Nothing more shall go out of those rooms."

And M. Chèbe, having shut the door, planted himself before it with a heroic gesture. You see his own interest was at stake too. If once his child was "turned out of house and home," he himself might be put to inconvenience. He was superb as the indignant father, but he did not maintain the position long. Two hands, two vices rather, gripped his wrists, and he found himself in the middle of the room, leaving the door free for the packers.

"Chèbe, my boy, listen to me," said Risler leaning towards him, "I am at the end of my tether. All this morning I have been making tremendous efforts to restrain myself; but it would not need much to make my anger burst forth, and woe then to him on whom it should fall. I am in a humour to kill some one. You had better get away quickly."

These words were spoken in such a tone, the manner in which his son-in-law shook him was so eloquent, that M. Chèbe

was convinced at once. He even stammered out some excuses. Certainly Risler was right to act thus—All decent people would be on his side. He drew back step by step to the door. Arrived there he asked timidly, if Madame Chèbe's little allowance would be continued.

"Yes," said Risler, "but don't go beyond it, for my position is altered. I am no longer a partner in the firm."

M. Chèbe opened his eyes wide indeed, and assumed that idiotic expression which made many people believe that the accident which had happened to him—you know, like that which befel the Duc d' Orleans—was not a tale of his own invention ; but he dared not say a word. Some malicious fairy must have sent him a new son-in-law. Could this be Risler, this species of tiger-cat, who bristled up at the least word, and spoke of nothing less than killing people? He stole away, recovered self-command only at the bottom of the stairs, but screwed up his courage to cross the court with a triumphant air.

When all the rooms were stripped of their furniture and empty, Risler went over them for the last time, then took the key down to Planus's office to give it to Madame George. "You can let the apartments," said he, "it will all be a help to set the business on its legs again."

"But what will you do?"

"I? Oh, I don't need much. An iron bedstead in the garret, that is enough for an assistant. I repeat, henceforth I am only an assistant. A good assistant though, valiant and trustworthy, whom you shall have no cause to complain of, I swear."

George who was going over some accounts with Planus was so moved on hearing the unhappy man speak thus that he left his place precipitately. His sobs choked him ; Clara, too, was greatly moved, and drew near to this new assistant of theirs.

"Risler," said she, "I thank you in the name of my father."

"It is of him I am thinking all the time, madame," he answered quite simply.

At that moment, Daddy Achille came in with the postbag. Risler took the heap of letters, opened them one by one tranquilly, and passed them in succession to Sigismond. "There is an order from Lyons.—Why have you not sent our answer to St. Etienne?"

He buried himself with all his force in these business details,

and brought to bear on them a lucidity of intelligence resulting from his firm efforts towards calmness and forgetfulness. All at once, amid the large envelopes, stamped with commercial names, whose very paper and folds spoke of the office, and of the hurry of business, he came upon one smaller, sealed with care, and so traitorously hidden among the others, that at first he had not perceived it. He quickly recognised the firm, angular writing, "Monsieur Risler,—Private." It was Sidonic's hand. On seeing it again, he experienced the same sensation he had felt above in her bedroom.

All his love, all his injured husband's wrath, mounted to his head with that force of indignation which makes murderers of men. What was she writing to him about? What lie had she now invented? He was about to open the letter; then he checked himself. He comprehended that if he read it, there would be an end of all his courage. Leaning towards the cashier: "Sigismond, old fellow," said he, in a low voice, "will you do me a service?"

"I should think so!" said the worthy man with enthusiasm. He was but too happy to hear his friend speak to him in the kind voice of old days.

"See, here is a letter which I have just received, and which I do not want to read just yet. I am sure it would hinder me from thinking or living. Keep it for me and this with it." He drew from his pocket a little parcel carefully tied up, and passed it to Planus through the opening in the wire screen.

"It is all that remains to me of the past, all that remains to me of that woman. I have made up my mind neither to see her, nor anything that will remind me of her, until my task here is done, and well done. I need all my head, you understand. You will pay the Chêbes their allowance. If she herself asks for anything, you will do what is necessary; but never speak of her to me. Keep these things carefully until I ask for them again."

Sigismond put the letter and the packet in a secret drawer of his writing-table with other precious papers. Then Risler returned to his correspondence, yet all the time he had before his eyes the slender, angular characters traced by a little hand, which he had so often and so ardently pressed to his heart.

CHAPTER V.

THE CAFE CHANTANT.

WHAT a rare and conscientious servant was this new assistant of Fromont's. Every day his lamp was the first lighted, and the last put out at the factory windows: They had fitted up for him a little room above, under the rafters, exactly like the one he had formerly occupied with Frank, a regular Trappist's cell, furnished with a little iron bedstead, and a deal table placed under his brother's portrait. He led the same active, orderly, retired life as in those old times.

He worked ceaselessly, having his meals brought him from the old little café. But alas! youth and hope for ever fled, had taken with them all the charm of the old habits. Happily Frank and Madame "Chorche" still remained to him, the only two beings he could think of without sadness. Madame George was always at hand, attentive to his comforts and eager to console him; and Frank often wrote to him without by-the-bye ever mentioning Sidonie. Risler thought that some one had told him of the evil things that had come to pass, and he on his part, in his letters avoided all allusion to the subject. "Oh! when I am able to have him home." That was his dream, his sole ambition—to restore the factory and recall his brother.

Meanwhile day succeeded day, one day much like another to him, in the active bustle of business and the sad solitude of his sorrow. Every morning he went down and looked through the work-rooms where the profound respect he inspired and his still austere countenance had re-established the order that had been for a time disturbed. At first there had been much gossip, and many varying comments on Sidonie's departure. Some said she had gone off with a lover, others that Risler had driven her away. But all speculations were upset by the attitude of the two partners towards each other, an attitude as natural as ever. Still sometimes, when they were speaking together alone

in the office, Risler would suddenly start as at a vision of the past. He would think how those eyes he had before him, that mouth, the whole face, had lied to him in a thousand ways.

Then a longing seized him to fly at the wretch, to seize him by the throat and strangle him without pity ; but the thought of Madame "Chorche" was always there to restrain him. Should he be less courageous, less master of himself than this young woman ! Neither Clara, nor Fromont, nor any one else suspected what was passing in his mind. Only there was a certain rigidity and inflexibility in his ways which had not been habitual to him. Risler now awed the workmen ; and those among them who were not filled with respect by the sight of his hair—that in one night had turned white—by his drawn, aged features, trembled under the strange glance of his eyes, dark blue like the steel of a weapon. Still very kind, very mild to toilers, he became formidable upon the slightest infraction of the rules. It seemed as though he were meting out punishment for some blind indulgence or other of which he had been guilty in the past.

Certainly he was a marvellous assistant, this new assistant of Fromont's. Thanks to him the factory-bell, despite the tremblings of its old cracked voice, had quickly recovered its authority ; yet he who kept everything going refused himself the least relaxation. Sober as an apprentice, he left three-quarters of his pay in the hands of Planus for the Chêbes ; but he never asked after them. The last day of the month the little man arrived punctually to draw his dividends, as it were, stiff and majestic with Sigismond, as an annuitant should be. Madame Chêbe had tried to see her son-in-law whom she pitied and liked ; but the mere appearance of her palm-branched shawl under the porch made Sidonic's husband take flight.

In fact, all the courage with which he armed himself was much more apparent than real. The memory of his wife never left him. What had become of her ? What was she doing ? He was almost angry with Planus for not speaking of her. The letter especially, that letter which he had been brave enough not to open, troubled him. He was ever thinking of it. How he longed to ask Sigismond to give it him back !

One day the temptation was too strong for him. He found himself alone in the office. The old cashier had gone out for luncheon, leaving, by extraordinary chance, the key in his

drawer. Risler could not resist the opportunity. He opened the drawer, ferreted about, turned over papers. The letter was no longer there. Sigismond had, no doubt, locked it up more carefully somewhere else, perhaps foreseeing what had actually come to pass. At heart, Risler was not sorry to be disappointed, for he well knew that if he had found the letter, there would have been an end to that active resignation which he enforced upon himself so painfully.

Throughout the week everything went on pretty well. Existence was made endurable by a thousand necessary business cares, cares which were so healthily fatiguing that Risler lapsed into unconsciousness as soon as he laid his head on the pillow. But the Sunday was long and painful to him. The silence of the factory-courts, the deserted work-rooms opened a wider field to his thoughts. He would try to work ; but would feel need of the encouragement of others working with him. He alone would be busy in the great inert factory, whose every breathing was stopped. The bolted doors, the closed blinds, the sonorous voice of Daddy Achille playing with his dog in the abandoned court-yards, all would tell him he was alone. And the very neighbourhood itself gave him the same sense of solitude. In the widened streets, where the passengers were few and quiet, the sound of the bells calling to vespers would fall in melancholy cadence on the ear, and an occasional echo of the tumult of Paris, some passing vehicle, some loitering organ, only made the succeeding silence seem more complete.

Risler sought after new combinations of flowers and foliage, but as he handled his pencil, his thoughts, which failed to find sufficient occupation in his work, would escape from his control, fly away to past happiness, to unforgettable agonies, would make him suffer martyrdom : and presently would ask of the poor day-dreamer, still seated at his table : "What have you been doing in my absence ?" Alas ! he had done nothing.

Ah ! how long, and sad, and cruel were those Sundays ! Remember that, despite all his heart-pangs, he shared the usual popular superstitions as to festal days, all the old artisan's attachment to the long twenty-four hours' rest, during which one recovers courage and strength. If he had gone out, the sight of a workman accompanied by a child or a wife would have made him sob ; but his Trappist-like seclusion subjected him to sufferings of another kind ; to that despair which sometimes seizes on the lonely, to that terrible revolt aroused in

them when the god to whom they have consecrated themselves does not respond to their sacrifices. Now Risler's god was labour, and as he no longer found in it peace or serenity, he no longer believed in it; rather cursed it.

Often, during these hours of struggle, the door of the designing room would open gently and Clara Fromont would appear. The isolation of the poor man during these long Sunday afternoons excited her pity, and she would come to keep him company with her little daughter, knowing by experience that the gentle charm of children is infectious. The little one, who could now walk alone, would slip from her mother's arms to run towards her friend. Risler would hear the tiny hurried footsteps. He would feel the faint breathing behind him, and would be somehow calmed and restored by it. How heartily would she put her little chubby arms round his neck! how artlessly, carelessly laugh! how prettily kiss him with her lips which had never lied! Clara Fromont standing at the door would smile as she watched them.

"Risler, my friend," she would say to him, "you should come down into the garden a little, you work too much. You will fall ill."

"No, no, madame. On the contrary, work saves me, it keeps me from thinking."

Then, after a long silence, she would resume: "Come, Risler, we must try to forget."

Risler would shake his head. "Forget, is it possible? There are some things beyond our strength. We forgive, but we do not forget."

Almost always the child would end by dragging him into the garden. He must willy-nilly, play at ball or some other game with her, but her playmate's awkwardness and want of spirit would soon strike the little girl. Then she would grow quiet and content herself by walking gravely between the box-borders, hand in hand with her friend. After a moment or two Risler would forget she was there, yet, without his noticing it, the warmth of the little hand in his own had a magnetically soothing effect upon his wounded spirit. Of a truth we forgive, but do not forget!

Poor Clara knew something of this also; for she had forgotten nothing in spite of her great courage and the high idea she had formed of her duty. For her as for Risler, the surroundings amidst which she lived were constant reminders of her

sufferings. They pitilessly re-opened her half-healing wound. The staircase, the garden, the courtyard, all these mute accomplices and witnesses of the past assumed on certain days an implacable look. Even the care and precaution which her husband took to spare her from painful memories, his significant abstention from going out in the evening, and the eagerness with which he told her all the details of his day, served only the more to remind her of her by-gone infidelity. She sometimes longed to ask him to spare her, to say to him: "Don't overdo it." Faith was shattered within her, and the horrible suffering of the priest who doubts and would yet remain faithful to his vows, betrayed itself in her bitter smile and her cold uncomplaining gentleness.

George was very miserable. He loved his wife now; the greatness of her nature had conquered him. There was admiration in his love too; and, to speak frankly, Clara's grief in his eyes supplied the place of a certain coquettishness, the want of which had always been a fault from her husband's point of view. He belonged to that singular type of men who love to make conquests. Sidonie, capricious and cold as she was, was precisely adapted to this weakness of his. After the most tender of farewells he would find her the next day as indifferent and forgetful as possible, and with him this perpetual need of rewinning her served the purpose of a true passion.

Serenity in love wearied him as a calm voyage does sailors. This time he had been very near a shipwreck with his wife, and even now all peril was not passed. He knew that Clara was estranged from him, wholly absorbed in their child, henceforth the only link between them. This separation made her appear more beautiful, more desirable, and he used his most seductive arts to regain her. He felt how difficult this would be, and that he had not to do with a commonplace spirit. Still he did not despair. At times, a vague light from out the depths of her soft and apparently impassive glance told him to hope.

As to Sidonie, he thought no more of her. Do not be astonished at this prompt moral rupture. These two superficial natures had nothing in them to attach them deeply to each other. George was incapable of durable impressions, at least, unless they were incessantly renewed. Sidonie, on her side, could inspire nothing lasting, nothing great. Their love had been as the love of fops and fast women usually is, the creation of vanity and piqued self-esteem, love which inspires

neither devotion nor constancy, but only tragical adventures, duels and suicides, suicides which are seldom more than unsuccessful attempts from which the desperate one emerges cured. Perhaps, had he seen her again he would have again caught the infection ; but the wind of flight had carried Sidonie away too quickly and too far for a return to be possible. Anyhow it was a solace to him to be able to live without lying, and the new existence he was leading, full of labour and privation, with an object to be aimed at afar off, did not repel him. It was well it was so ; for all the courage and energy of the two partners were not more than sufficient to raise the house again.

In truth the house still leaked in all directions. Old Planus still passed many bad nights, tormented by the nightmare of the day of reckoning, and the fatal vision of the little blue man. But by dint of economy they always succeeded in paying everybody.

Four Risler printing-machines were soon permanently at work in the factory. Some commotion arose in the wall-paper trade. Lyons, Caen, Rixheim, great centres of this industry, were much disquieted by the marvellous "rotative and dodecagonal press." Then one fine day the Prochassons presented themselves with an offer of three hundred thousand francs simply to share the right in the patent.

"What shall we do?" asked Fromont of Risler.

The latter shrugged his shoulders indifferently : "Decide yourself. It has nothing to do with me. I am only an assistant."

Spoken coldly, without anger, these words checked the heedless joy of Fromont, and recalled him to a situation which he was always on the point of forgetting.

Once alone with his dear Madame Chorche, however, Risler counselled her not to accept Prochassons' offer. "Wait, do not hurry. Later on you will get a larger sum."

He only spoke of the Fromonts in this business in which he had so glorious a share. It was clear that he was separating himself beforehand from their future.

Meanwhile, orders came in and accumulated. The quality of their papers and the reduction of price, consequent upon increased facility of manufacture, rendered all rivalry futile. There was not the least doubt that a colossal fortune was preparing for the Fromonts. The factory had resumed its former flourishing aspect, and its great hive-like humming. All

its buildings, and the hundreds of workmen that filled them, were full of activity. Daddy Planus never raised his nose from his work; he might be seen from the little garden, bending over his great account books, putting down in magnificently formed figures the profits made by the new printing-machines.

Risler, too, worked on as ever, without break or rest. The return of prosperity changed nothing in his habits of seclusion; and it was from the highest window of the top story of the mansion that he heard the active sound of his machines. He was neither less sombre nor less silent. One day, however, news came to the factory that the Risler machine, which had been sent to the great exhibition at Manchester, had obtained a gold medal, a definite consecration of its success. Madame George called Risler into the garden at breakfast time, and announced to him the glad tidings.

At first a smile of pride lit up his aged, and saddened face. His inventor's vanity, the just pride that comes of well-earned fame, above all the thought that he would thus gloriously repair the mischief wrought by his wife to the firm, gave him a minute of true happiness. He clasped Clara's hand and murmured, as in the good days of old: "I am so happy!—I am so happy!"

But what a difference of intonation! It was said without spirit, without hope, with the satisfaction that comes of an accomplished task, and nothing more.

The bell rang for the workmen to return to toil, and Risler went back quietly to work as on other days. A moment after he came down again. In spite of all that had happened this news had caused him more agitation than he cared to show. He wandered about in the garden, and rambled round the cashier's office, smiling sadly at old Planus through the window.

"What's the matter with him?" the old fellow asked himself. "What does he want of me?"

At last when evening came, at the moment of closing the counting-house, Risler made up his mind to enter and speak. "Planus, old man, I want——" He hesitated a little. "I want you to give me—the letter, you know, the little letter with the packet."

Sigismond looked at him in stupor. In his simplicity he had imagined that Risler no longer thought of Sidonie, that he had quite forgotten her. "What! you want——"

"Ah ! listen. I have well earned it. I can think of myself a little now. I have thought enough of others."

"You are right," said Planus. "Well ! I'll tell you what we'll do. The letter and the packet are at my house at Mont-rouge. If you will, we'll go and dine together at the Palais Royal, you know—as in the good old times. I'll stand treat. We will baptize your medal in wine such as we don't drink every day, something good ! Then we'll go on together to my house. You will take your trifles ; and if it is too late to return, Mademoiselle Planus, my sister, will make you up a bed and you shall sleep with us. It is comfortable, over there, it's quite the country. To-morrow morning at seven we will return together to the factory by the first omnibus. Come, old fellow, give me this pleasure. If not, I shall believe you still bear a grudge against old Sigismond."

Risler accepted. He thought little enough of celebrating his medal, but a great deal of opening some hours earlier than otherwise he would do, the little letter he had at last conquered the right to read. He had to dress. It was quite an undertaking after the six months that he had lived in a working jacket. And what an event in the factory ! Madame Fromont was quickly informed of it. "Madame, madame, there is Monsieur Risler going out !"

Clara watched him from her window, and the tall form bent with sorrow leaning on the arm of Sigismond caused her a singular and profound emotion which she remembered ever afterwards.

In the streets passing friends hailed Risler with unusual warmth. Their simple welcomes stirred his heart. He had so much need of kindness. But the noise of the wheels made him slightly giddy. "My head is in a whirl," he said to Planus.

"Lean well on me, old fellow, don't fear."

And the worthy Planus drew himself up, supporting his friend's steps with the artless and fanatical pride of a Southern peasant bearing his village saint in his arms.

They arrived at length at the Palais Royal. The garden was full of people who had come to hear the music, and amidst the dust and the noise of shifting chairs every one was seeking a place. The two friends quickly entered their restaurant to escape from all this bustle. They installed themselves in one of the large saloons on the first floor, whence might be seen the green trees, the promenaders, and the fountain playing between

the two melancholy flower beds. For Sigismond this restaurant saloon, with its gilded ceiling, gilded pier-glasses, gilded chandeliers, was the very acme of luxury. The white napkin, the little rolls, the "fixed price" dinner filled him with delight. "This is jolly, isn't it?" said he to Risler. Then at every one of the dishes of this half-crown feast he exclaimed, eagerly filling his friend's plate, "Try some of that, it is very good."

The other, in spite of his desire to do honour to the feast, seemed preoccupied and kept looking out of window. "Do you remember, Sigismond?" he said presently.

The old cashier, full of his memories of old times when Risler first came to the factory, answered, "I should think I do remember. The first time we dined together at the Palais Royal, was in February '46." Risler shook his head. "Oh, no! I spoke of three years ago. It was over there, opposite, we dined that famous evening." And he pointed to the great windows of Véfours's saloon which the setting sun lit up, like the chandelier at a wedding feast.

"It is true," murmured Sigismond, a little confused. What an unfortunate idea of his to bring his friend to a spot that reminded him of things so painful.

Risler, not wishing to throw a gloom over the repast, suddenly raised his glass: "Come! your health, old comrade."

He tried to turn the conversation. But a moment afterwards he himself came back to the same subject, and in a low tone, as though ashamed of what he was saying, asked: "Have you seen her?"

"Your wife? No, never."

"She has never written?"

"No, never."

"But still, you must have heard some news. What has she been doing these six months? Is she living with her parents?"

"No."

Risler turned pale. He had hoped that Sidonie had returned to her mother, that she would have worked like himself, that she, too, might at once forget and expiate. He had often thought, that according to what he heard of her after he had the right to speak of her, he would regulate his future life; and in one of those distant musings on the future, that have the indistinctness of a dream, he at times saw himself self-exiled with the Chébes in the heart of some unknown region where nothing

would remind him of the shameful past. It was not a project, certainly, but it lived at the bottom of his heart as a hope, and as part of the desire every creature has to return to happiness.

"Is she in Paris?" he asked, after some moments' reflection.

"No; she went away three months ago. They don't know where she has gone to."

Sigismond did not add that she had gone away with her Cazaboni, whose name she now bore, and that they were on a tour in the provinces, that her mother was in despair, never saw her and had no news of her but through Delobelle. Sigismond did not think he ought to tell of these things, and after his last words he was silent. Risler on his part did not dare ask anything more.

Whilst they thus sat opposite each other, embarrassed by the long silence, the military music burst out under the trees of the garden. The band was playing one of those Italian opera overtures which seem made for the open sky of a public promenade, and the full harmonious notes of which mingle, as they rise in the air, with the "poot! poot!" of the swallows and the pearly gush of the fountain. The loud brass instruments bring out all the warm softness of the summer evenings, so oppressive and so long in Paris; it seems as though you heard nought else. The sound of distant wheels, the cries of children playing, the footsteps of the promenaders are borne away by these sonorous, rushing, refreshing waves, as necessary to Parisians as the daily watering of the streets. All around the drooping flowers, the trees white with dust, faces made pale and dull by the heat, all the sorrows, all the miseries of a great city lying and dreaming on the garden benches, derive from the music a sense of relief and comfort. The air is stirred and renewed by these melodious strains which traverse it and fill it with harmony.

Poor Risler felt a relaxation of all his nerves. "That does one good, a little music," said he with glistening eyes; and he added, lowering his voice: "My heart is full, old fellow—If you only knew."

They remained without speaking, leaning against the window while coffee was served. Presently the music ceased and the garden became deserted. The daylight, which still lingered at the intersection of the streets, mounted to the roofs and cast its last rays, on the highest windows, followed by the swallows,

who from the gutters where they collected together, saluted with a final chirp the closing day.

"Come, where shall we go?" said Planus on leaving the restaurant.

"Where you like."

Quite near, on a first floor in the Rue Montpensier, was a café chantant where they saw many people entering. "Shall we go up?" demanded Planus, who wished at any cost to dissipate the sadness of his friend, "the beer is capital."

Risler allowed himself to be led in; he had not tasted beer for six months. It was an old restaurant transformed into a singing-hall. Three large rooms had been thrown into one by removing the partitions. The ceiling was supported by gilded columns, and the walls and pillars were painted in imitation of the Moorish style,—bright red and light blue, and with plenty of crescents and turbans everywhere.

Though it was still early the place was full. You felt stifled even before you went in, simply at sight of all this accumulation of people closely seated around tables. Right at the further end, half hidden by the row of columns, were a number of white-robed women collected together on a platform and looking remarkably hot in the gas-light.

Our two friends had some difficulty in finding a seat, and even then it was behind a pillar, whence a view was gained of only a part of the stage, which was just then occupied by a superb gentleman in dress coat and yellow gloves, curled, waxed, pomaded, who was singing in a voice which made the glasses rattle,

"Mes beaux lions aux crins dorés
Du sang des troupeaux altérés,
Halte-là—je fais sentinellô !"

The audience, little shopkeepers in the neighbourhood accompanied by their wives and daughters, seemed enthusiastic enough, the women especially. He was so exactly the ideal of their shopkeeping imaginations, this magnificent shepherd of the desert, who spoke to lions with such authority and watched his flock in evening dress. Despite their prim airs, their modest dress, and their fixed tradeswomanlike smiles, all these women caught at the sentimental bait, and looked languishingly at the singer. The comical part of it was to see this look transform itself suddenly and become fiercely contemptuous as they caught sight of their husbands, their poor husbands

tranquilly drinking their bocks of beer opposite them : " You couldn't stand sentinel in the teeth of the lions, and in a dress coat, too, and with yellow gloves."

The husband's eye seemed to answer : " Ah ! yes, he is a deuce of a fellow that."

Indifferent enough to this kind of heroism, Risler and Sigismond drank their beer without paying much attention to the music, when—the song being ended—amidst the applause, shouts, and general uproar that followed, old Planus uttered an exclamation : " Well, that's queer—really it might be—yes, I am not mistaken—It is he, it is Delobelle !"

It was in truth the illustrious actor whom he had just observed, in the first row next the platform. His grizzled head was three-quarters turned towards them. He was carelessly leaning against a column, hat in hand, in his " first night " get up—dazzling linen, frizzled hair, dress coat with a camelia in the buttonhole, worn as though it were a ribbon of the Legion of Honour. He looked from time to time on the crowd with a supremely superior air ; but it was towards the platform that he turned oftenest, with pleasant glances, little encouraging smiles, and affected applause, addressed to some one whom from his place Planus could not see.

The presence of the illustrious Delobelle in a concert-hall was nothing very extraordinary since he spent all his evenings out ; still the old cashier felt a certain uncasiness, especially when he perceived in the same row of spectators a blue cloak and a pair of steel blue eyes. It was Madame Dobson, the sentimental singing mistress. These two faces, seen thus close together, amid tobacco-smoke and a chattering music-hall crowd, had rather the effect of a vaguely horrible dream upon Sigismond. He feared for his friend, without knowing precisely why ; and suddenly the idea struck him that he had better get him away. " Let us go, Risler, this heat is killing," he said.

Just as they were rising to leave—for Risler cared nothing whether he stayed or went—the orchestra, which was composed of a piano and several fiddles, began playing an eccentric burden. There was a movement of curiosity in the hall. People cried : " Hush ! Hush ! Sit down !"

They were compelled to resume their seats. Risler began to be uneasy. " I know that air," said he to himself. " Where have I heard it ?"

Thunders of applause, and an exclamation from Planus, made

him look up. "Come, come; let us go," said the cashier, trying to lead him away. But it was too late.

Risler had already seen his wife advance to the front of the stage and bow to the public, smiling the while like a ballet-dancer. She wore a white robe as on the night of the ball; but there was now less richness in her attire and more license. Her dress just barely hung on her shoulders, her hair floated in a blonde cloud right down to her eyes, and round her throat was a necklace of pearls, too large to be real, which stood out with all the glitter of tinsel. Delobelle was right: the Bohemian life suited her. Her beauty had gained a certain careless expression which gave it a character of its own, and made her really the type of the woman escaped from conventional control and delivered over to all hazards, descending step by step to the lowest point of the Parisian pandemonium with nothing in the world powerful enough to lead her back to pure air and light.

And how thoroughly at ease she seemed in her actress-life. With what self-confidence she advanced to the front of the platform. Ah! if she could have seen the desperate and terrible look fixed on her from below in the hall by a man hidden behind a column, her smile would not have had that shameless placidity, her voice would not have found the caressing languishing inflections with which she warbled the only ballad Madame Dobson had ever been able to teach her:

"Pauv' pitit mani'zelle Zizi,
C'est l'amou, l'amou qui tourne
La tete à li."

Risler had risen in spite of the efforts of Planus to hold him back. "Sit down—Sit down," cried the audience.

The unhappy man heard nothing. He looked at his wife.

"L'amou, l'amou qui tourne
La tête à li."

repeated Sidonie mincingly.

For a second or two Risler asked himself if he should not leap on the stage and kill them all. Red lights flashed before his eyes, and he felt half blind with rage. Then suddenly shame and disgust seized him; and he dashed out, overturning chairs and tables, and pursued by the surprised imprecations of all the scandalized shopkeepers.

CHAPTER VI.

SIDONIE'S VENGEANCE.

NEVER during the twenty years he had lived at Montrouge had Planus come home so late without giving notice beforehand to his sister. Mademoiselle Planus was therefore in a great state of anxiety. Living in a community of ideas and of everything else with her brother—the two having as it were but one soul between them—the old maid had shared during the past months all the uneasiness, all the indignation of the cashier; and this rendered her easily agitated. At the least delay in Sigismond's return she was accustomed to think to herself,—“Ah! good heavens! I hope nothing has happened at the factory.”

This is why on this evening when the fowls were perched and asleep, and the dinner had been removed untouched, Mademoiselle Planus was seated in her little low-roofed room anxiously waiting.

At last towards eleven there was a ring. A dull and timid ring, not at all like Sigismond's vigorous jerk. “Is that you, Monsieur Planus?” asked the old lady from the top of the door-steps.

It was he; but not alone. A tall bent old man followed him, who on entering said “Good evening,” in a slow voice. Then only did Mademoiselle Planus recognise Risler whom she had not seen since New Year's Day, that is to say, some time before any of the terrible scenes at the factory. She could hardly suppress an exclamation of pity; but in presence of the grave silence of the two men she understood that she must be quiet.

“Mademoiselle Planus, my sister, put fresh sheets on my bed. Our friend Risler will do us the honour of sleeping here to-night.”

The old maid quickly hastened to prepare the chamber with an almost tender care; for you know, that besides “M. Planus, my brother,” Risler was the only man excepted from the general reprobation in which she enveloped the entire sex.

On leaving the concert-hall, Sidonie's husband had been frightfully excited for a minute or two. Convulsive jerks shook him from head to foot as he leant on Planus's arm. He seemed just then to have no further thought of seeking the letter and the packet at Montrouge. "Leave me—go away," said he to Sigismond, "I wish to be alone."

But the other took good care not to leave him thus to his despair. Without Risler perceiving it, he led him far away from the factory; and a wisdom which came straight from his heart told him what was best to speak about to his friend. He talked of nothing but Frank, Risler's little Frank, who loved him so much. "That, yes, that was affection, true and sure. No treachery to fear with hearts like his!"

Thus discoursing, they had quitted the noisy centre of Paris. They went on, along the quays, skirted the Jardin des Plantes, and plunged into the Faubourg Saint Marceau. Risler allowed himself to be led. The words of Planus did him so much good. So they reached the Bièvre, bordered hereabouts by tan-yards, and presently Montsouris plain, burnt and scorched and deprived of vegetation, by the flame of the breath of Paris. From Montsouris to the fortifications of Montrouge is only a step. Once there, Planus had little difficulty in leading his friend to his home. He thought justly, that his peaceful interior, and the spectacle of a calm, devoted fraternal love, would give to the heart of the unfortunate man, a foretaste, as it were, of the happiness that awaited him with his brother Frank. In truth, they had no sooner got in, than the charm of the little home began already to operate.

"Yes, you are right, old fellow," said Risler, walking with long strides up and down the room. "I must think no more of that woman. She is dead to me now. I have only my little Frank in the world.. I don't know yet whether I shall bring him back or go out to him. Any way, we will live together. I wished so much to have a son. Here is one ready made for me. To think that I had the idea, for an instant, of killing myself. Ah! she would be only too pleased at that, Madame What-d'ye-call-it, down there. I will live, on the contrary, live with my Frank, and for him alone."

"Bravo!" said Sigismond, "that's how I wanted to see you."

At that moment Mademoiselle Planus came to announce that the room was ready.

Risler began to make excuses for the trouble he was giving.

"You are so comfortable, so happy here. It is a shame to bring my troubles to you."

"Eh ! old fellow, you may be as happy as we are," said the worthy Sigismond, beamingly. "I have my sister, you have your brother, what more do we want ?"

Risler gave a faint smile. He fancied himself already installed with Frank in a tranquil little quaker-like house such as this. Decidedly old Planus had hit upon a good idea. "Come to bed," said he, with a triumphant air. "I'll show you your room."

Sigismond's room was on the ground floor, a large room simply but decently furnished, with chintz curtains at the windows and forming the canopy of the bed, and having little squares of carpet, in front of each of the chairs, on the well-polished floor. The elder Madame Fromont herself would have discovered nothing to find fault with in the order and cleanliness of the place. On the shelves, which served as a bookcase, a few volumes were ranged : "Le Manuel du Pêcheur à la Ligne," "La Parfaite Menagère à la Campagne," "Les Comptes faits de Barême." That was all the intellectual side of the apartment.

Old Planus looked around him proudly. The glass of water was in its place on the walnut table, and the shaving-tackle on the dressing-table. "You see, Risler, there is everything necessary. Besides, if you want anything, the keys are in all the drawers—you have only to pull them open. And look, what a fine view one has from here. It is a little dark now ; but to-morrow morning, when you wake, you will see it is magnificent."

He opened the window : great drops of rain were beginning to fall, and flashes of lightning breaking the darkness showed the long silent line of the ramparts extending away in the distance, with telegraph posts in line, or the sombre doorway of a casemate. At intervals the step of a patrol on the road under the ramparts, the rattle of a rifle or a sabre reminded you that you were within the zone of the fortifications. That was the view so much extolled by Planus, a melancholy view if ever there was one.

"And now, good night—Sleep well."

But as the old cashier was about to leave, his friend recalled him : "Sigismond ?"

"Here," said the good man, and he waited.

Risler blushed slightly and made a movement of the lips as

though he were about to speak ; then with a great effort over himself he said : " No, no—nothing—Good night, old fellow."

In the dining-room the brother and sister talked late in whispers. Planus related the terrible event of the evening, the meeting with Sidonie, and doubtless there were many mutual outcries of " Oh! the women! the women!" " Oh! the men! the men!" At last when her brother had closed and locked the little garden door Mademoiselle Planus went to her room and Sigismond installed himself as well as he could in a little closet adjoining.

Towards the middle of the night the cashier was suddenly awakened by his sister who was calling him under her breath in great alarm. " Monsieur Planus, my brother!"

" Well!"

" Did you hear?"

" No. What is it?"

" Oh! it was frightful. Something like a great sigh, but so loud, so sad, it came from the room below."

They listened. Outside the rain fell in torrents with that rustle of the leaves which gives to the country so complete an impression of extent and isolation.

" It is the wind," said Planus.

" No, I am certain not. Hush! listen!"

In the tumult of the storm a cry rose up like the painful and sob-choked articulation of a name : " Frank! Frank!" It was sinister and pitiful. When Christ on the cross gave forth to the void space of heaven his desperate cry, " Eli, Eli, lamma sabacthani," those who heard him must have experienced the kind of superstitious terror that suddenly seized Mademoiselle Planus. " I am frightened," said she. " Suppose you go and see."

" No, no. Let him be. He is thinking of his brother, poor fellow. It is just the thought that will do him most good." And the old cashier turned to sleep again.

The next morning they were awakened as usual by the *réveille* sounding from the forts, for this little household surrounded by barracks regulated all its movements by the military signals. Mademoiselle Planus, already risen, was feeding her fowls, when seeing Sigismond up, she came toward him a little agitated. " It is very singular," said she, " I don't hear Monsieur Risler moving, yet his window is wide open."

Sigismond greatly astonished went to knock at his friend's

door. "Risler ! Risler !" He now spoke somewhat uneasily, "Risler, are you there ? are you asleep ?"

No one answered. He opened the door. The room was cold. It was clear that through the open window, the outside damp had come in during all the night. At his first glance at the bed, Planus thought—"Why he has never lain down." In fact, the counterpane was untouched, and every detail of the chamber revealed a vigil of agitation, the yet smoking lamp which had never been extinguished, the water-bottle completely emptied in a fever of sleeplessness ; but what really terrified the cashier was that he found the drawer, in which he had carefully placed the letter and the packet confided to him by his friend, wide open.

The letter was no longer there. The unfolded packet remained on the table revealing a photograph, the portrait of Sidonie at fifteen. With her old-fashioned dress, her rebellious hair parted at the front, and her stiff constrained bearing, the little Chèbe girl of former days, the apprentice of Mademoiselle Le Mire, little resembled the Sidonie of to-day. Just for this reason Risler had kept that photograph as a memorial, not of his wife, but of the "little one."

Sigismond was thrown into consternation. "It is my fault," he said to himself. "I ought to have taken away the keys. But who would have suspected that he thought of her still ? He declared over and over again, that the woman no longer existed for him."

At that moment Mademoiselle Planus entered, her face full of terror. "Monsieur Risler has gone !" said she.

"Gone ? The garden door was not shut then ?"

"He went over the wall. You can see the marks."

They looked at each other in horror. Planus said to himself, "It is the letter."

Evidently this letter from his wife must have told Risler some strange news, and in order not to awaken his hosts he had escaped noiselessly by the window, like a thief. Why ? with what object ?

"You will see, sister," said poor Planus, as he finished dressing quickly, "you will see that that hussy has played him yet another trick." And whilst the old maid tried to reassure him the good man kept repeating his favourite phrase, "I have no confidence !" As soon as he was dressed he rushed out.

The footsteps of Risler were visible on the rain-soaked ground up to the gate of the little garden. He must have left before

dawn, for the squares of vegetables and the flower-borders were trampled at hazard by deep footmarks separated by long strides; the wall was scratched at the bottom and some of the plaster was knocked away at the top. The brother and sister went out on the circular road-way. Here it became impossible to follow the footmarks further. It was evident, however, that Risler had gone in the direction of the Orléans road.

"In fact," hazarded Mademoiselle Planus, "need we worry ourselves; perhaps he has merely returned to the factory."

Sigismond shook his head. Ah! if he had said all that he thought. "You had better go in, sister," he remarked; "I myself will go and see." And old "I have no confidence" went off like the wind, his white hair still more on end than usual.

At that hour, on the circular road, there was a continuous going and coming of soldiers, of market-gardeners, of reliefs. Officers' horses were being exercised, canteen-men were hurrying along, there was the usual morning bustle round the forts. Planus hastened on with long strides through the varied crowd, but suddenly stopped. On the left, at the foot of the glacis, in front of a little square building—on the rough plaster of which was inscribed in black "Ville de Paris, Entrée des Carrières"—he perceived a crowd assembled, soldiers' and custom-house officers' uniforms mingling with the loose soiled blouses of the loafers of the outskirts. Instinctively the old man drew near. Under a round postern with iron bars at the top, a custom-house officer, seated on the stone step, was speaking with much gesticulation, as though demonstrating something.

"He was here where I am," said he. "He hanged himself seated, bearing with all his weight on the rope—like this—ho! And you may be sure he had made up his mind to kill himself, for they found a razor in his pocket, which he would have used if the rope had broken."

A voice in the crowd said, "Poor devil!" Then another voice, which trembled and was half strangled with emotion, asked timidly: "Are they quite sure he is dead?" And looking at Planus every one began to laugh.

"There's an old goose!" exclaimed the custom-house officer. "When I tell you he was quite blue this morning, when we cut him down to carry him to the chasseurs' barracks."

These barracks were not far off; and yet Sigismond had all the difficulty in the world to drag himself thither. It was in

vain he said to himself that suicides were not rare in Paris, especially in these localities, that not a day passed without some corpse being picked up along the long line of the fortifications, as on the shore of a dangerous sea—nothing could remove the frightful presentiment that had all the morning been weighing on his heart.

"Ah! you come about the man that hanged himself," said the quarter-master at the gate of the barracks; "he is in there."

They had laid out the body on a trestle-table in a kind of coach-house. A cavalry-cloak thrown over it covered it entirely, and fell around winding-sheet-wise, with the rigidity appertaining to all that death has touched. A group of officers and some soldiers in canvas trousers looked on from a distance, speaking in a low voice as if in a church; and on the sill of a high window an assistant surgeon was writing out the certificate of death. To him Sigismond spoke.

"I should like to see him," he said softly.

"Look!"

Sigismond approached the trestles, hesitated a minute, and then taking courage, uncovered a swollen face; and tall form, motionless in its rain-soddened garments. "She has ended, then, by killing you, old comrade," murmured Planus, and he fell on his knees sobbing.

The officers had drawn near, curiously, to look at the uncovered corpse. "Look, surgeon," said one of them. "He has his hand closed as if he were clasping something."

"That's true," said the surgeon, drawing near. "It happens sometimes in the last convulsions. You remember at Solferino? Major Bordy held the miniature of his granddaughter in his hand like that. We had a deal of trouble to get it from him."

Whilst speaking he tried to open the poor hand clenched in death. "Ah!" said he, "it is a letter that he was holding so tightly."

He was going to read it; but one of the officers took it from his hand and passed it to Sigismond who was still on his knees. "Look, sir. 'Tis, perhaps, a last wish to be fulfilled."

Sigismond Planus rose. As the place was dark, he approached the window totteringly, and read with eyes dimmed with tears:

"Yes, I love you, I love you—more than ever, and for ever! What is the good of struggling and fighting? Our crime is stronger than we are. . . ."

It was the letter which Frank had written to his sister-in-law a year previously, and which Sidonie had sent to her husband the day after the final scene between them, to avenge herself on him and his brother at the same time.

Risler might have survived the treachery of his wife ; but the treachery of his brother had at once slain him.

When Sigismond comprehended it all he stood still in awe. He remained with the letter in his hand, looking mechanically before him through the wide-open window.

Six o'clock was striking. Below, over Paris, which he heard roar but could not see, a mist arose, heavy, warm, slowly stirring, fringed at the edge with red and black like the cloud which rises over a field of battle. Little by little, steeples, white façades, a golden cupola or two showed through the fog, glittering in the splendour of dawn. Then, in the direction of the wind, the thousand factory chimneys, towering above this mass of clustered roofs, began all at once to breathe forth their panting vapour with the energy of a steamer about to start on a voyage. Life began again. Onwards, machine ! And so much the worse for him that lags on the road. .

Sigismond gave way to a movement of terrible indignation :

"Ah ! hussy ! hussy !" cried he, brandishing his fist. Did the old cashier speak to Sidonie, or to Paris ?

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